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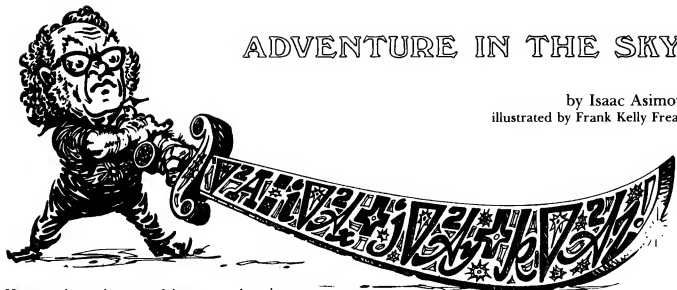
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ADVENTURE IN THE SKY

by Isaac Asimov
illustrated by Frank Kelly Freas



Here we have the second issue of *As/Am*. I assume that since you are reading this, you have enjoyed the first issue and are back for more—or have missed the first issue and are sorry and won't do that any more.

Either way, let's continue the discussion of adventure that I began in the first issue.

Science fiction adventure shifts the accent of the stories, but not the content. The feeling of suspense, of being caught up in a whirlwind of action, is heightened in such stories; the pauses for contemplation of philosophical and psychological points are lessened. The characters in the adventure stories tend to fight the battle with external forces and are less likely to struggle with internal uncertainty. But however strong the accent on adventure, there must remain some sort of scientific background or the story ceases to be science fiction. That is the content that remains.

In the adventure story, to be sure, we can't afford the luxury of long scientific discussions, and it wouldn't be good practice to hang the crux of the plot on an arcane point of theory—but trimming the fat doesn't mean we eliminate the meat.

After all, science itself is an adventure, a great adventure, the greatest that humanity has ever known. It has brought us to the heights; it threatens us with the depths; it offers us both new victories and new dangers—and perhaps ultimate defeat.

This is true even of the oldest, the quietest, the most removed of

the sciences—astronomy.

Let me give you an example. Every year, a friend of mine, Robert Little, organizes an "Astronomy Island Cruise." Some forty or fifty of us take the good ship *Statendam* from New York to Bermuda. There we stay through four days and three nights before returning to New York.

The trip is luxurious, the island is beautiful, the whole thing is happy and relaxing, but the nub of the matter is astronomy. Those who have the equipment (and quite a few do) bring their various telescopes with them and set them up at a "land-site," an estate just a couple of miles from the harbor. During the day we can observe the Sun; during the night we can observe the planets and stars.

That may not sound exciting, but it is. Despite my dislike for travelling, I have gone on the 1978 edition of the cruise, and it was full of adventure—provided you know what you're looking at.

On the night of July 11, in the warm, clear sky of Bermuda, there were the following bodies in a straight line, moving upward from the western horizon: Mercury, Saturn, Venus, Mars, the Moon, and Uranus.

We looked at each one, and each one was more than just a blob of light. Each had an astronomical history that was enormously exciting.

The Moon was a trifle less than half-phase, and in the telescope it looked as though it were made of pure, white chalk. (It isn't actually; it is composed of rather dark

rock that reflects only 7 percent of the light that falls on it. That 7 percent, however, in the absence of an obscuring Lunar atmosphere is enough to make the Moon glow a brilliant white.)

In the chalky whiteness, I could make out, very clearly, numerous craters, especially toward the terminator, where the shadows of the crater walls are long. Back in 1609 that was exactly the sight that met Galileo's eye as he peered at the Moon through his first telescope.

Until that moment, a few thinkers had theorized that the heavenly bodies might be worlds, but in one flashing observation, Galileo *proved* that at least the Moon was. It was not the smooth and perfect heavenly object it was thought to be. It was as rough and uneven as the Earth was. It was another world.

That discovery set off the first science fiction boom (a small one, of course) the world had seen. There had been isolated tales of interplanetary tales before Galileo, but now a group of books on the subject loaded the printing presses.

The sight I saw, then, was the origin of my profession. How could I help but be moved?

Venus and Mercury were each in the half-phase, each a tiny semi-circle of light; and that sight, too, marked a great adventure. In 1543, Copernicus had suggested that the planets (including Earth) moved around the Sun instead of, as had been believed for ages past, the planets

(including the Sun) moving around the Earth.

For two-thirds of a century, controversy raged. The Copernican view made more sense in some way, the older one in other ways. How could one decide between the two?

Then came Galileo with his telescope and saw that Venus could be a semi-circle of light, just as I now saw it. Indeed, as Venus moved back and forth across the sky, it went through all the phases the Moon did.

By the older theory, Venus could never have anything but a crescent shape. By the new Copernican theory, Venus would have to behave exactly as Galileo had observed it to behave. This discovery was the final nail in the coffin of the old theory, and Galileo was so nervous about the possible repercussions that he announced his discovery in code.

It meant, then, that when I stared at Venus and Mercury each as semi-circles of light, I was staring at the proof that Earth moves through space.

As for Mars... it was just 101 years ago that the "canals" on Mars were discovered; and for nearly a century many people were convinced there was intelligent life on Mars and, indeed, an advanced and, perhaps, dying civilization.

Think what that did for science fiction! Within twenty years of the discovery, H. G. Wells published *War of the Worlds*, the very first science fiction story that featured interplanetary warfare. Until then, what science fiction stories had been written were rather philosophic or satiric. Strange other worlds were observed and explored, but the accent was on the customs of the alien societies or on the reaction of aliens to our own customs.

War of the Worlds involved rapid action and danger and catastrophe. It was the first science fiction adventure story, and the whole field was thus born of a view of Mars through a telescope.

Of course, I couldn't see any canals through the small telescopes on Bermuda, but that doesn't matter. In the 1970s, we

finally got a truly close look at Mars by way of planetary probes, and it turned out that there were no canals after all. They were optical illusions. But they had played their role in the development of science fiction.

Saturn is the jewel of the Solar system. I stared at it through each of two different telescopes and found it, as always, unbelievable. It showed up as a small disk of light surrounded by a neat, close-fitting ring that we could see at a small angle to the line of sight. Since Saturn is so far away, Galileo couldn't quite make out what it was that caused the planet to look so odd. It took over forty years before Christiaan Huygens made out the planet well enough to understand the nature of the rings, and then he announced his discovery in code.

For three centuries after that we thought Saturn and its rings were unique in the Solar system—and, for all we knew, in the Universe. Then, in 1977, it was discovered that Uranus had rings, too. The Uranian rings were thin, dim, far too faint to see; and when I looked at Uranus through the telescopes, it was just a small bit of light. No one can see the rings.

How did we find out, then? Well, Uranus was going to pass in front of a small star, and astronomers wanted to study what happened to the star-light as it began to pass through Uranus's atmosphere. They could then tell what gases there would be in that atmosphere. However, before Uranus reached the star, that star dimmed, brightened, dimmed, brightened, and so on. The star was passing behind thin and unseen rings.

Adventure? The astronomers who had been quietly waiting for contact between Uranus and the star and who became conscious of dimming, where no dimming ought to have been, undoubtedly never before had—and probably never again would have—a moment that exciting and pulse-stopping.

Adventure is where you find it—and you can't miss it in science.

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Dear Mr. Scithers:

Captain Ambascal stalked the bridge of the interstellar dreadnought in a blue fury. Lesserbeings scattered from his path, and he snarled at anyone who spoke to him. He was on the verge of commanding the crew to stand a spacebag inspection, just to spite them, when the fleet-footed courier raced onto the bridge, clutching a large, saddle-stapled magazine.

"I've got it, sir!" he cried breathlessly, skidding to a halt before the formidable captain.

Captain Ambascal still frowned. "Is it in mint condition?" he asked in his booming voice.

"Yes sir," said the trembling courier, handing over the magazine. "You may inspect it yourself, sir."

Grinning for the first time that day, the captain settled himself in his chair, and contentedly began reading the first issue of *AsfAm*.

"I notice they didn't print the story detailing my adventures in conquering The Howling Toads of Altair 8, where I saved the Galaxy from a hideous fate and expanded the boundaries of the Tristar Federation!" bellowed Ambascal.

"I'm afraid *The Saturday Evening Post* also rejected it, and several copies have been lost in the Terran mails because they don't accept Interstellar Reply Coupons," said the courier.

"You know," said Ambascal, after reading everything but the lead novel, "there are those of us who thought that Terran stf had just about died the year *Startling Stories* and *Planet Stories* bit the cosmic dust. Where would we read those great Ed Hamilton and Emmett McDowell yarns in the future? Sure, we loved the cerebral stuff too, but some of us thought Ed Hamilton was pretty darn cerebral and, even better, really emotional. I guess it took Isaac Asimov to save us at last, with George Scithers doing the yeoman work. That Anderson yarn was a breathtaker, even though he made the somewhat odd assertion that a frying pan possesses both resistance and capacitance. Obviously air would be the dielectric, but could the rounded rim of such a pan really serve as the plates?

"Guess what? I even enjoyed the Alan Dean Foster story! Yes, I know he committed an unpardonable crime by authoring that putrid novel *Icerigger*, but this one I really enjoyed. 'Bystander' didn't quite tickle me fancy so much as 'Captivity of the Centaurians,' but good nonetheless.

"Who is this Jesse Peel? Keep him around! Really liked that martial arts story; didn't like the *Feghoot* though. They're getting so obtuse only Terrans can figure them out.

"I think the Good Doctor could have done better than 'Fair Exchange,' but it wasn't bad.

"Hey! They got a poster of Paul Alexander's cover in here! And loads of good interiors by Alex Schomburg. Why, I can recall that he illustrated most of the Dec. 1938 issue of *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, an issue which featured Weinbaum, Hamilton, two by Kuttner, along with Simak and Cummings and Eando Binder. Those were good days for sf. And what's this? Lin Carter writing letters again? I see the Sage has relocated his Big Red Letters too; they're on his aura now, not on his forehead. Maybe somebody out there might even track down Joe Gibson and ask his opinion of the magazine."

The courier coughed and said, "Sir, I hate to interrupt you, uh, reverie, but I thought you'd like to know that the magazine is already under attack."

"Attack!" roared Ambascal. "What slime would dare attack this magazine?"

"It's the work of Mainstream Meddlers. I found an article in the Chicago Tribune entitled 'Sci-fi's Evolution: Odyssey That's Stranger Than Fiction.'"

Ambascal winced at the title.

"It's by a fellow named Steve Gunn who is either entirely ignorant of the field or is just poorly educated and uses sweeping generalizations instead of facts. He compares *Stars Wars* to Golden Age sf..."

"Aaargghh!"

"...calls it mere thud-and-blunder space opera, and quotes a James Stupple who says that it represents the 'more mind-numbing and stupefying aspects of science fiction,' then goes on to say..."

Captain Ambascal had risen to his

feet in a purple rage. "Is Edmond Hamilton mind-numbing?!" he screeched. "Is Keith Laumer stupefying?!"

"...he then infers that Lester Del Rey remarked that science fiction magazines appeal to the relatively unsophisticated fan. Although no direct quote is made."

"Blasphemy!" shouted Ambascal. "The man must be lying. Lester would never say anything that stupid."

"He then quotes George as saying, in reference to the purpose of the magazine you are now holding, that 'we hope to follow up on the fun of *Star Wars*.' He also says that mainstream literature and sf are coming closer together, feels the New Wave has saved sf, and seems to believe great literature needs a psychologically unbalanced character rather than someone with steely grey eyes, bulging thews, a spaceman, and a universe to conquer."

"Well, so what?" said Ambascal, to the surprise of his men. "What if As/Am was rushed up to follow the success of *Star Wars*? What of it? The stories in here show what can be done with adventure. Right now I just started Harrison's latest *Stainless Steel Rat* story, and it looks good. It might not be another *Bill*, *The Galactic Hero*, but scintillatingly brilliant satires don't happen that often. I just hope they stay true to their title here, and don't make it a carbon-copy *IA'sfm* with one action yarn per issue to satisfy the throng. And just for the fun of it, send our Vegan hit-men after that Gunn character. Maybe we should get one after George too, make him publish some Laumer yarns or Hamilton reprints."

"It's about time to go, Cap'n," said the XO, a wiry Callistan. "Where to this time?"

With a far-away look in all eight of his eyes the captain said, "To the Asteroids, you swabs! We have to take care of the Crusty Crabs of Crater 9!"

"Aye, aye sir!"

Sincerely,

FTM3 Steven L Duff
7804, FT/C School
NPDS/Seasprow GM School
Dam Neck VA 23461

Dear George,

And they've been saying time travel is impossible. Tsk, tsk.

With *Asimov's SF Adventure Magazine*, you are also proving telepathy and the fact that great minds run in parallel grooves. For years now I have been howling wildly that the science-fiction reader would respond warmly—and profitably for the publisher—to stories that were entertaining, just plain *entertaining*. No message. No vast, convoluted universal truths. No relevance.

Who the hell *wants* relevance, anyway? Inflation is relevant; taxes are relevant; the arms race is relevant; acne is relevant. It has always seemed to me that the best reason for reading SF is to escape from relevance long enough for a short breather.

During the late, great, dark days of the New Wave, I wrote no SF and read practically none. I had always read SF because it was entertaining and it jacked up my imagination. Now, here was the literary vice of my youth, telling me that I had to figure out what everyone was bellyaching about and why science fiction had to tote that weary load. The genre came close to extinction. The essential fun of it had been thickly larded over with gloomy, constipated heroes, murky metaphors, and dreary guided tours through dank and boring corners of the human spirit.

Such was not the case when I was a squirrelly kid. Myself and a lot of other squirrelly kids cut our puppy fangs on *Planet Stories*, *Wonder Stories*, *Startling*, *Astounding*, *Galaxy* and on and on. Our parents weren't quite sure what we were doing or why, but they were quite sure we were rotting our little brains by reading all that "fantastic trash," which we hoarded and collected in our bedrooms, piling it up like sandbag parapets to stave off the assaults of encroaching adulthood.

Some of us, I'm happy to report (myself among them), have escaped from the snares of growing up. Who the hell wants to be

an "adult." Yecchhhh. Others, more fortunate, were never trapped by growing up at all. Someone—I think it was Ted Sturgeon—once remarked that all writers are crazy children and that if you can understand that idea it becomes very simple to understand writers. I'm not positive that Ted said that, but if he didn't, he should have.

Science fiction and its practitioners continue to spread, it seems to me, because of that same childlike cheerfulness. We don't (or ought not to) get gloomy over dire pronouncements about the impending end of the human race by way of any number of holocausts and disasters—several are currently in fashion. Science fiction and its people seem to proceed in a kind of ignorant optimism which takes it for granted that all that "fantastic trash" about going to the moon, the Terran Federation, faster-than-light travel, and our meetings and traffic with aliens not greatly different from ourselves is going to come true.

When I was an introverted youth, lolling around and reading SF, any serious talk about sending a man to the moon and returning him safely to Earth was considered to be an obvious symptom of a dangerously twisted mind. My sober predictions that this item of "fantastic trash" would actually occur before the end of the century was met with mixed but uniformly negative reactions from my elders. In 1950 I didn't know exactly how this item of "fantastic trash" would be pulled off; that is, I couldn't explain the technology of the matter, since we didn't possess it at the time. I just knew it was going to happen, and I was too ignorantly optimistic to realize it was impossible.

My mother worried a good deal that she had, through no fault of her own, reared an unnatural child.

Now, in my jaded maturity, I have the same blind and stupid faith that within the next twenty-five years or so we will be getting into faster-than-light travel and contragravity. I don't know how;

I just know we will. My colleagues—almost all of whom "know" more about science than I do—cluck disconsolately about my simplistic naïveté. "Poor old Tuning," they say. "The booze has finally fried his brains. He's starting to slip his sprockets and burn out his bearings."

Well, we'll see.

The point of all this—if I may sound pontifical for a moment—is that today's SF readers need the cheerful optimism, unencumbered or strangled by a Message, of a magazine like *Planet Stories* or *Wonder Stories*. They haven't been getting it. Why else, for heaven's sake, the astonishing cult (astonishing to others, not to me) of "Star Trek" and *Star Wars*, except that these items of entertainment smile and say "yes" to the future.

With *AsfAM* you are giving us what we're hungry for, George. Far too long it has been that SF, watered down with the academic claptrap which attaches itself to "serious literature," has been feeding the readers pappy pabulum while their appetites continue to crave roaring red meat.

Remember that as you edit this magazine. And, if anyone even suggests that the stories should be more "relevant," give him a pop in the chops. Good old "fantastic trash" is the stuff of which our dreams are made.

Cordially,

William Tuning

Mr. Tuning's comments were written (at my invitation) before he actually saw a copy of AsfAM. The letters that follow are by readers who have seen our first issue.

—George H. Scithers

Dear Sir:

I just finished the first issue of *Asimov's SF Adventure Magazine* and thought it was great. I hope it does well enough for you to offer a subscription for it. Isn't your decision not to offer a subscription in the first issue rather pessimistic? Or did you just forget to put it in? Even though the Stainless Steel Rat is one of my favorite characters, I liked

Lin Carter's recreation of a *Planet Stories* letter best. I was not aware that this magazine was an adventure mag, but now I'm going to start collecting *Planet Stories*.

As I like war stories, I thought "Hurling Hell-Hordes of Hermes" sounded great. Perhaps you will reprint it somewhere.

Sincerely,

Jim Milburn
1216-F Marconi
Houston TX 77019

Not pessimistic at all. Just a commendable caution. We don't want to take your money until we know we can deliver.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers and Dr. Asimov,

I anxiously awaited the arrival, to the newsstands, of *Asimov's SF Adventure Magazine*. I counted the days, hoping and praying for a unique, thrilling, exciting new magazine. I anticipated that a new age for SF was dawning.

I was mistaken.

Asimov's SF Adventure Magazine hit an unheard-of low for magazine entertainment. The stories were in the range from tepid to poor to boring. All of the art, save Paul Alexander's fine cover illustration, was terrible. Why not use the good illustrators—such as Freas, di Fate, Sternbach, or Barr?

With the first issue of *AsfAM*, I expected dueling space opera with fantastic adventures. What I received was not of the Skylark, Lensman, Legion-type story—it was trifle.

And at an inflated price! (Mind you, I don't mind spending extra for SF when it's worth it, and I realize that a "valiant" attempt to bring back full-size SF is expensive to publish—but...)

Will *AsfAM* improve for next issue? I certainly hope so; because I'm willing to give the people who put out *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* another chance.

Please, make Issue 2 worthwhile—and apply the same standards of excellency that you used in *IsfM*.

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Respectfully,

Douglas D. Seifert
1004 Country Club Dr.
N. Palm Beach, FL 33408

There's an old maxim that goes: You can't print them if you don't get them. Shoot-em-up space opera will be published if, first, we get them, and second, they're good. And who decides if they're good? Why, we do, and no one else. That's the Law of Editorial Autocracy.

—Isaac Asimov

Sirs:

I picked up your modern-day
Planet,
And skeptically started to
scan it,
Prepared for more swill—
But try as I will,
I can't find a reason to
pan it.

There's nothing to bounce my
sarcasm off.
Hurray for this new mag from
Asimov!

The prose and the verse
could be a lot worse,
And the bras of the girls:
Schomburg has 'em off!
Best,

Buck Rogers

*Wilma Deering always said Buck
Rogers was good; but I didn't know
he was good at limericks, too.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers,

I am always glad to see a new pro-zine hit the stands. While I buy all the major trade magazines, including the stf publications, I never, try as I might, quite manage to read any of them cover-to-cover from month to month. I made *Asimov's SF Adventure* an exception. Here are my impressions and opinions, for what they're worth, as a reader.

Your distribution, if handled in the same manner as *IA'sfm*, should be outstanding. The price surprised me, but it seems about right. I liked the idea of no departments, just fiction, for this gives me incentive to read the

stories, instead of, as I often do, just reading editorials, reviews, and so on, and skipping the fiction. The cover and large format caught my eye immediately; I'd been expecting *Asfm*, but did not know what to look for. Yours was the first I saw on the stand. By the way, maybe it would be a good idea not to advertise "bonus" color posters, let them be a surprise. My "bonus" was ripped off by some adventurous middleman. (He might have lost a regular customer!)

Inside, I consider the artwork adequate to very effective, Schomburg's illos being the most compatible with the surrounding story. The fiction itself was entertaining, but, I regret to say, not outstanding. The two space operas were very well in keeping with the adventure spirit, but the three short stories did not, I feel, qualify for an adventure magazine. The three shorts all might have appeared anywhere. Foster's story had a good ending, but the story was a suspense story in which the protagonist did little more than contact aliens via radio. The setting was a stock-in-trade science fiction, not really original. J. Peel's offering was very good, but again, the only action was a couple of martial-arts demonstrations. The setting again was underdone. And finally, we come to Dr. Asimov's version of an alternate/parallel world, which has been around for a very long time. I liked the stories, but they didn't strike me as being very adventuresome.

I like my SF crammed to the brimming point with ideas. I feel that an adventure story should try very hard to meet this requirement. Fleshed-out, original settings might also be of value. Fast-paced, closely plotted action is a must, along with truly dynamic characters, for the successful adventure. A good adventure story would fill this mold as closely as possible, not partially. Some of the stories did meet some of the requirements; for example, Peel's protagonist had earth-shattering capabilities, but they were left out of the story.

The length of short stories

places limitations on the writer, but does not restrict him/her from writing good adventure. A. E. van Vogt wrote such stories, and perhaps still does. Ron Goulart certainly turns out fast-paced fiction, and so did Isaac Asimov. In longer length categories, Harry Harrison's *Deathworld* novels certainly filled the bill, and Piers Anthony turned out such outstanding examples of adventure with *Macroscopic* and *Pthor*. There must be many more examples of good adventure. Satire such as *The Space Merchants*, *Bill the Galactic Hero*, and *The Iron Dream* is also adventure by my lights.

Asimov's Adventure Magazine didn't disappoint me, but in my opinion, the zine did not live up to its title. By the way, after finishing *As/Am*, I reread the editorial. Dr Asimov defined the adventure story in general, but did not define the SF adventure story; he merely told us what it didn't have to be. I'd like to add to that. SF adventure need not be space-opera.

Sincerely,

Tom Kavanaugh
5629 W. Washington Bd.
Milwaukee, WI 53208

I count on George's steely grip and steady eye to squeeze the needed stories out of writers, and the writers will see to it that they're good.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers:

I recently received the first copy of *As/AM* Magazine in the mail and have enjoyed it very much, especially "Where Now is Thy Brother, Epimetheus?", "Fair Exchange?", and "The Stainless Steel Rat Wants You!" In this last story, other adventures of Slippery Jim diGriz were mentioned several times, and I am wondering if Harry Harrison has already written, or intends to write any sequels.

The only thing about the magazine that I did not like was its size. Smaller-sized magazines are neater looking, and are thicker and more compact, so that they don't get bent up in the mail, and stay in better condition

longer than large-sized magazines. Anyway, I think that small magazines are more attractive and stand out more from all the other magazines on the stands. In spite of this one complaint, it was an excellent issue and I am looking forward to more.

Tammy Sanders
1377 N. Linden Rd.
Flint, MI 48804

On the other hand, large-sized magazines are easier to read, allow better artwork, and so on. And in the last analysis, it's the content that counts. Right?

—Isaac Asimov

Mr. Harrison tells us that "The Stainless Steel Rat Wants You!" is the most recent of a long series of tales about Slippery Jim & Family.

Letters to the Editor should be addressed to the magazine here at Box 13116, Philadelphia PA 19101. They are read by the editor; the publisher, Mr. Joel Davis; and by the editorial director, Dr. Asimov. We're interested not only in how you like this, our second issue, but also in details of our distribution—when did you first see this issue on the newsstands, did you see it on many other newsstands, and the like. All of these data help us to make the magazine what you want it to be and to get it out into the world for our readers to find and buy.

—George H. Scithers



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CONAN THE LIMMERIAN

by L. Sprague de Camp

illustrated by Roy G. Krenkel

*The careers of heroes like Beowulf have been told in stately epics.
Conan the Cimmerian, however, seems to call for a lighter touch . . .*

When Conan in foggy Cimmeria
Found life in the sticks ever drearier,
 To southward he fled
 And stole for his bread
And soon became very much cheerier.

He went at his calling with zest;
He robbed and he slew with the best;
 Confronted great apes
 And spiders and shapes
That feverish nightmares infest.

But press though he would this pursuit,
He never could garner the fruit;
 He found, to his grief,
 That some cleverer thief
Had always made off with the loot.

So with the profession of crime
Was Conan disgusted in time;
 Then eastward he hied
 And soldiering tried
In arid Hyrkania's clime.





He learned how to shoot and to ride
And journeyed afar and awide,
But had to desert,
The sources assert,
For laying an officer's bride.

Then piracy next he assayed,
With Bêlit, the raven-haired jade;
He carted off sacks
Of loot from the blacks,
But Bêlit by death was betrayed.

Well, after adventures in Kush,
He migrated north from the bush;
He fluttered some queens,
Made sanguinous scenes,
And far to the east did he push.

He ravaged the Vilayet coasts
And turned many men into ghosts;
Of Yildiz the weak
His whiskers did tweak
As Conan made good on his boasts.

Of barbarous hillmen the head,
He sought with an empress to bed
But, after this scheme
Dissolved like a dream,
Again expeditiously fled.

Then back in the West, with his sword,
He tried to take many a hoard,
While pirates and dragons
And wenches and flagons
Allowed him no time to get bored.

As he, out for fortune and fame,
To fair Aquilonia came,
The army he chose,
To officer rose,
And, fighting the Picts, made a name.

When Conan in pokey was placed,
By fatuous monarch disgraced,
He borrowed a hammer,
Broke out of the slammer,
And westward to Pictland he raced.

The foolish Numedides swore
Of Conan he'd never see more,
But soon for his own
Did Conan the throne
Usurp in a merciless war.

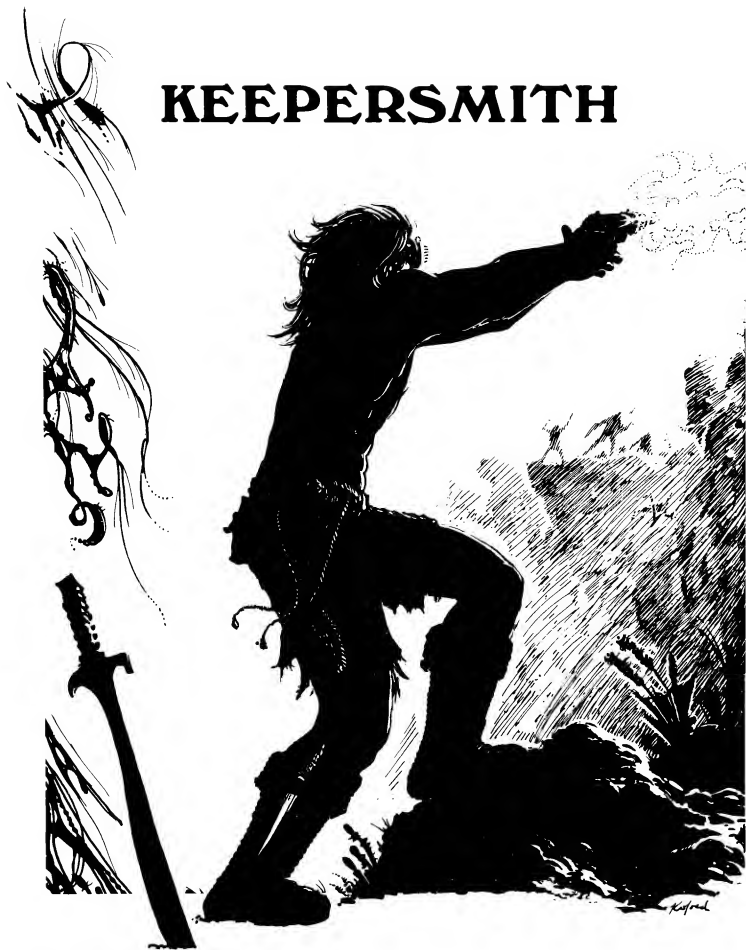
So Conan at last became king
And thought it a glorious thing;
But rebels and rotters
And sorcerous plotters
Did soon disillusionment bring.

Then age, with infallible aim,
Did Conan the daredevil tame;
Now settled with wife,
Relinquishing strife,
He virtuous almost became!

© 1978 by L. Sprague de Camp



KEEPERSMITH





by Randall Garrett & Vicki Ann Heydron

illustrated by Karl Kofoed

Earthbird Class: Small (96m) destroyers of tremendous power, with hulls having a full 2 mm of endurium plating, and manned primarily with fighting personnel, these ships were designed, not for space warfare, as the larger craft were, but to board and destroy the Snal-things in their hidden deep-space nests wherever they were found.

Keepersmith stood in the doorway of Keepershome and faced the three people who had come through the chilly morning at his command.

He was a big Man, with wide shoulders and a tough-muscled body that had been hardened by the same heat and pressure that forged raw steel into Smithswords.

"I am leaving," he said quietly.

Only Hollister, eldest of the three, understood.

The aged Macson, whose eyes reflected craft-

iness but little wisdom, said, "Of course you're leaving! The thaw has begun and your Ironhunt was due several days ago. I was just saying to Yarma—"

"Never mind, Macson," said Yarma. Almost as tall as Keepersmith, Yarma's brawn had slipped and puddled around his waist, but his brain was active and he sensed some little of what Keepersmith meant. "When will you be back, Keepersmith?"

"Before the first snow," Keepersmith answered in his deep voice. "I will return when I can."

And then they all understood.

Keepersmith was clothed as usual for an Ironhunt, in a fur garment which covered his torso but left his arms and legs free, and fur boots thong-wrapped to his knees. At his left side hung his own great sword, the finest ever forged. At his right, in its own holster, was

Ironblaster, the legacy of the *Hawk*.

All that was normal: the sword for his own protection, and Ironblaster, which only the Keepersmith could use, which he held in trust for the future when the *Hawk* would return for his people, and which was the only instrument that could draw iron from stone.

But the heavy pack was not normal. Strapped to his back, it was usually empty when he left and full of iron when he returned, but now it was obviously already loaded with supplies.

"Where are you going?" asked Hollister.

"South," said Keepersmith tersely.

Macson blinked. "For how long?"

"For as long as it takes."

"But—you can't do that!" Macson's voice seemed to break, but he cringed back as Keepersmith's dark gaze flashed to his face. "I—I mean, you have duties here!"

"Joom will remain," said Keepersmith evenly. "He is skilled and has iron enough. He will serve you well. And as for duty, it is my duty to go."

After a moment's silence, Hollister said, "Something has happened."

Keepersmith's hard face softened as he looked at the old woman. To Hollister would fall the great burden of leadership once he had gone. Macson and Yarma were useful as leaders only if she led them.

"Perhaps. I cannot say for sure. That is why I must go. To be sure, Joom knows the Reading, and I have left Writing with him which tells why I must go. If I have not returned by snowfall, he will read the Writing in your presence."

"And then?" Hollister looked at him steadily with her wise old eyes.

"Then Joom will be Keepersmith, and another decision must be made."

Yarma looked troubled. "Leave Ironblaster." His voice quavered a bit under Keepersmith's gaze, but he continued. "If there is a chance you won't return, you *must* leave it."

"No. If I leave it, there is less chance I will return. I am Keeper until my death." Without another look, he walked away from the home he had known since he was apprenticed to the last Keepersmith at only ten summers.

Half a day from the village, Keepersmith was still walking steadily through the slowly warming foothills. The air was fresh and slightly chill, and the ground laced with small furious rivulets from the melting snow that came from the mountains behind him, but already there were loudbirds and a touch of

budding green in the branches of the hedge-like vecca trees that covered these lower hillsides.

At noon he rested briefly and ate. He drank from one of the icy streams and was on his way again, moving steadily south. The ground grew more level, and the rivulets of water more scarce. When he paused at dusk, he filled a skin with water, and ate sparingly.

The night was clear, and well-lit by Gemni, the double moon, and this was still familiar land, land he had travelled often.

Near midnight he saw a flickering light ahead. He moved quietly to the edge of a stand of tall thran trees and looked out into a small clearing. A last rocky ridge extended here from the mountain range, and under an overhanging cliff some four meters high a small campfire was burning.

Beyond the fire, with his back to the stone wall, sat a scaled creature with four Man-like limbs. He sat motionless, staring with shining eyes which protruded from a delicately boned, chinless face. Firelight reflected from the web-work of scales that was his skin, sending up a sheen that made his skin look wet.

How he likes the fire, Keepersmith thought. *I believe that it was good to teach them about fire. But should we give them the secret of forced fire? Could we trust even Liss with that power?*

Deliberately, he stepped out from the trees, and the eyes of the creature lifted from the fire directly to him. "Sssmith." The soft voice blended with the fire noises.

Keepersmith walked to the fire, squatted down beside it, and put aside his pack.

"Where is it, Liss?" he asked.

The Razoi picked up a bundle from the ground near him and reached into it with a long-fingered hand. The object he handed Keepersmith gleamed in the firelight.

It was a handweapon much like Ironblaster but smaller, and the control knobs along the side were not the same.

The Razoi, unfamiliar with both weapons, could not see the differences. "It *is* the ssame, Sssmith," said Liss, looking across the fire. "The ssame metal as Ironblasster."

"Yes," agreed Keepersmith, "much the same."

"You ssaid that two dayss ago," Liss reminded him. "Why did you ssend me away sso soon?"

"Don't be offended, friend. I could not explain then. I cannot explain yet, but—" Keepersmith turned the thing in his hands so that the firelight highlighted the Writing on the controls:

Kill—Stun.

And across the butt:

I. S. S. Hawk.

"This is not for everyone to see. It is important and I must understand it before I tell anyone else about it."

"Tell me about it, Sssmith."

Keepersmith looked up from the shiny thing in his hand and considered the being across the fire. He was a Razoi, one of the oldest of a long-lived race, a member of the tall northern tribe which had for many Man generations lived across the high mountains from the valley where the Men lived.

Keepersmith had met Liss when he was a boy, walking for pleasure in the hills above the Smithy. The Razoi had appeared from behind a group of boulders and had called to him. The boy, frightened because he had heard so much evil of this kind of creature, nonetheless had stood his ground—but the Razoi had only talked to him. In halting Man language he had spoken of friendship, of learning, of sharing.

"You will be leader," Liss had said, and the boy knew then that the Razoi had lain in wait not for any Man, but only himself. And it impressed him, as not even learning the Writing had done, that he would one day have to lead the Men on this world.

"You will learn," said Liss. "Teach us. Teach me and I will teach them. We will not fight you."

Then Liss had come down from the hillside to stand in front of him. They had been of a size, the gangly, already muscular thirteen-summer boy and the slim and ageless Razoi. Liss had raised his weapon, a wooden staff with a stone axe at one end and the other sharpened to a point, and had laid it down at the feet of the boy.

"I will khome again. Remember."

Then Liss had walked into the brushy hillside and the boy had stared after him, still speechless.

Liss had come again ten summers later, as the new Keepersmith walked those same hills in wordless grief, struggling to accept not only the loss of a man who had been a father to him, but what that loss meant—the heavy responsibility fallen now to his own shoulders. Keepersmith had accepted the Razoi's friendship then and had not yet regretted it.

The village did not approve when this one Razoi left the guarded trading compound to visit Keepersmith outside—always *outside*—the Smithy. They suspected, but couldn't forbid, that Liss sometimes went along on ironhunts, and had watched while Ironblaster melted into a mountainside. But they did not know that

Liss asked only for what Keepersmith could give, and in turn gave him something the lonely boy and the solemn man could never know otherwise—the companionship of an equal.

Another ten summers had passed, and, in all that time, Keepersmith had never spoken to Liss of the *Hawk* or the heritage of Men. He had sensed that it was this knowledge Liss really wanted, but would not ask for fear of offending Keepersmith. The Razoi had been the enemies of Man in the past, and though Keepersmith trusted Liss, they were too different. They would never truly understand one another. And the secrets of the *Hawk* had been guarded by Keepersmiths for generations. Could he be the one to reveal them to a Razoi?

If it weren't for Liss, I'd never have seen this . . .

Suddenly he lifted Ironblaster from its place at his belt and set both things beside the fire.

Ironblaster was much larger than the other object, but it was obvious that they belonged together. Their shapes were roughly similar and the bright glow of the fire lit up the matching inscriptions: *I. S. S. Hawk*.

"Ssee, Sssmith, it iss sso like Ironblasster. But it is ssilent, while Ironblasster roarss. What dooss it mean?"

"It is a message from the *Hawk*," Keepersmith answered. "A message I do not under-



stand. Liss, what do you know of how Men came to be here?"

"Only that one day they were here. They ran up from the south, pursued by dusteaters. And they slew my people, and we fought to live. They drove us out of our valley and took it for themselves."

Keepersmith could not conceal his surprise, and Liss smiled grimly. "Some things do not need Writing to be remembered."

"Those Men had no choice, Liss. They had a duty—to the *Hawk*."

"And what is the *H-hawk*?" asked Liss, hesitating over the unfamiliar word.

"Not all Men agree about that, Liss. Some believe that the *Hawk* is a god, a mighty being who cast us out of the sky to punish us for something we did. Others say that such talk is only superstition, and the *Hawk* does not exist at all."

"And you, Sssmith? What do you say?"

"I know the truth, Liss, or as much as the Writing can tell me. This world is only one of many—there are hundreds of others, surrounded by something called space, where there is no air to breathe. The *Hawk* is a ship which could travel between those worlds. It brought my ancestors to this world. . . .

"And then left them here."

"Why?"

"Not even those who made the Writing knew that. But they were sure of one thing—the *Hawk* would return for them. The first Keepersmith, who spoke for the *Hawk*, said that we must keep all the knowledge we had, so that when the *Hawk* did return we would be ready."

"Ready?" asked Liss.

"To leave," answered Keepersmith, so lost in his own musing that he did not see the spasm which crossed Liss's face. "The *Hawk* will take us all away from your world, Liss. It will be yours once again."

Keepersmith reached over and picked up the small object. "This may be the signal we have been waiting for. Or it may not. I must know for certain; I must go to where it was found."

"I found it on the belt of one of the southern—" He used a word in his own language, and the contempt in his voice was unmistakable. "Before he died, he told me where he found it."

"Can you take me there?"

"Yess."

Keepersmith put the small thing in his pack and holstered Ironblaster. Then he stretched out beside the fire.

The Razoi stretched out too, as near the fire

as he could get without scorching himself. They lay there in silence for a few moments, and then Keepersmith spoke.

"Are your people bitter, Liss?"

"Some of them. But we have akhssepted it. Our lives are better for your pots and your cloth. And now for your fire. My tribe is settled now in our valley—we would not wish to move again."

"Why do the southern tribes raid and kill?"

"There is only one southern tribe left. They fight and slay bekhausse—" the closest the Razoi could come to the Man's "k" sound was a throat-clearing noise, "they have always done it. They are stupid. They are our enemies too."

"If we must go now, Liss—will you be glad to have us gone?"

The other was quiet for so long that Keepersmith was afraid he had already fallen into the odd open-eyed sleep of his kind. But at last the soft voice came sibilantly across the fire.

"No. You and I, Sssmith, we have made our own beginning. You are teaching me and I will teach my people. We will both be stronger for it."

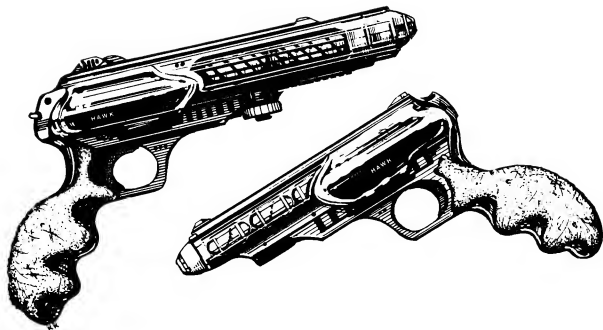
"And I would miss you, Sssmith."

That dawn and the many that followed found them moving, Liss in the lead and setting a steady, moderate pace. The passing of time and the changing character of the land made the terrain greener, but less inviting than Keepersmith's mountain valley.

For here, where there was plenty of game and adequate water and little effort needed to grow half-wild crops, there was also continual danger. Pockets of Men had drifted down from the mountains and settled here in a territory that was still claimed by the Razoi as their own.

In places where a single Man village lived in uneasy truce with its nearest Razoi neighbors, both were in constant fear of the southern tribe. Thought to be desert-based and so called "dusteaters" by the Razoi, they were shorter than the northern breed and of slightly different coloring, but they were broad-shouldered, heavily muscled, and ferocious fighters. They struck Northward in small bands and then retreated to the safety of the southern desert. They were raiders and bandits, hated by everyone.

Yet the common enemy was not enough to unite the plains peoples into the kind of peace that Keepersmith and Liss shared. The raids only made the Men more suspicious of their



neighbors, regardless of their different appearance. A Man travelling with a Razoi was not only unusual—he might be viewed as traitorous.

So Liss and Keepersmith avoided any settlements as they moved southward. They camped one evening beside a clear placid stream lined almost down to the water with broad-leaved fera trees. Keepersmith picked one of its fruits, but the orange hue and crisp skin of the small ellipsoid told him that it was still in its second phase and would be poisonous to a Man. So he rested against the thick trunk of the tree and ate some dried meat while Liss put aside his pack and staffaxe and dived soundlessly into the stream.

Keepersmith watched the shiny green forehead bobbing up every few seconds until it disappeared around an upstream bend. Then he bent over and took the small thing Liss had brought to him out of his pack. He reflected, as he did so, on the importance of the material from which the pack had been made.

The alth was a large carnivore which was hunted for food by the northern Razoi. Its thick skin, virtually indestructible once shaped and properly cured, had been the first basis of trade between Liss's people and the shivering human refugees who had fled northward.

The southward tribes could not stand the cold, but alth skins made the climate liveable for Liss's people. They covered cave mouths and the doors of earthen huts, and made warm sleeping nests for the families. They lasted so well that the Razoi had more than they needed, and the Men needed them badly.

But the Men had nothing to trade.

Had it not been summer when the Men reached their valley, they would not have survived. For it took weeks of experimenting and failing before they struck the right mixture and the right process to manufacture a tradeable item—a glazed jug which would store water, so necessary to the Razoi through winter and drought.

But trade began in time, and by winter the Men had cured enough alth skins to clothe themselves and make their primitive shelters bearable. And one Man had carefully split squares of the thick hide into supple, thin layers. She had rebound them with a hide thong and begun the Writing.

The Writing was knowledge, and it was the very heart of Keepersmith's life. It contained all the knowledge the *Hawk* had left with them, and all the things they had learned on their own. The pottery formula. All the useless designs and the one successful one for a loom to weave the fibery grainflowers into coarse cloth. The secret of forced fire and the agonizing story of how they tried and failed, that first winter, to forge steel.

And the Writing told of that next summer's hardship, when only Ironblaster saved them from being overrun by wave after wave of southerners returning to fight in the warmer weather. A passage from that section had special meaning for Keepersmith as he held the metal thing:

All the guns are gone now, broken by stone axes or clubs or, bless them, by dying men who would

not have them reach the three-fingered hands of our enemies.

The Blaster is all we have left now of the *Hawk's* equipment, but its explosive effect makes it useless at short range. We have weapons, but they are not much better than the Razoi's, and we are only learning to use them. The Razoi are skilled and strong and savage, and we are all weak and hungry.

Winter will be here soon, and we will have some rest from attack. We have managed to store some food—dried meats and some wild grain. Some of us will survive this second winter, but we will all die next summer if we don't have some kind of short-range weapon more effective than the ones the Razoi carry.

I see only one choice for us. I must take the Blaster with me now, before winter sets in, and hunt out some iron deposits. Then, through the winter, I will try again to forge a workable steel weapon—a sword. That will give us longer reach, and a cutting edge. It may be enough of an advantage.

I am leaving secretly, because I know there are those among us who would see only that I am leaving the settlement undefended. They would not understand, as I do, that if I don't go we have only one bleak winter ahead of us. If I do go, and I am successful, we may all live to see the *Hawk* return.

I pray that it may be so.

There was no doubt in Keepersmith's mind that the object he held was one of the "guns" the Writing referred to. It said little about them, except that they operated on the same principle as Ironblaster, and Ironblaster was described and diagrammed in detail.

He heard a splashing sound, and looked up to see Liss climbing out of the water some twenty meters downstream, carrying three large fish. He twisted the head off each one and placed the heads carefully on the bank. Then he squatted down and began to eat the fish in small, delicate bites, thoroughly chewing all the bones except the backbone. He would be a long time at his meal.

Keepersmith looked back at the gun in his hand. Now was the time.

A sharp twist removed half of the butt and revealed a latch which, when pressed, lifted off another section. Keepersmith examined the interior of the gun, comparing it to his knowledge of Ironblaster.

Similar, but far from identical. The Bending Converter was much smaller. The Converter used a process which Keepersmith did not entirely understand. He knew that it took

common water and converted it into helium and oxygen. But he was not certain why it created the power which, focussed through the barrel of Ironblaster, created enough heat to melt mountains.

He knew what the energy of Ironblaster could do. Fired at a living thing, tree or Razoi or . . . Man, the water in the target turned instantly to high-temperature steam, causing a tremendous explosion. Ironblaster was not a weapon that could be used at close range.

But in the gun which Liss had brought, there was a different sort of apparatus. The power created by the Bending Converter was apparently channelled electrically through a vibrator which changed the tremendous electrical energy into ultra-sonic vibrations and focussed it down the short barrel of the gun.

That much he knew from the Writings.

He frowned in concentration, trying to remember the Writings about Ironblaster.

The reserve energy cell broke water down into hydrogen and oxygen. The oxygen was discharged as a waste product, and the hydrogen converted into helium in the Bending Converter. Ironblaster's reservoir held a good mouthful of water, but there was no reservoir in the smaller weapon. But the Bending Converter was obviously there, and so far as Keepersmith knew, its fuel was—*had to be*—water. Where, then, did the water come from?

Again he searched his memory. The little vents in the rear of the barrel told him they took in air and condensed the water from the air.

And then he suddenly knew what this weapon was. It was something that Ironblaster had never been designed for. It required only the power it could draw from the moisture in the air, and it could kill enemies at close range.

He looked again at the switch on the side.

Kill. Stun.

It was not even necessarily designed to kill. Again his probing eyes looked at the mechanism in the open butt. This weapon should, like Ironblaster, be self-fueling and self-operating. Then why wasn't it? There were stains on the butt which indicated the gun had been used as a club—surely even a southern Razoi would have figured out how to use it properly if it were still working.

Carefully, reverently, he drew Ironblaster from the holster at the right side of his belt and opened it in the way that only he knew how. Yes, they were similar. Not identical, but similar. He traced the thin lines of Ironblaster's circuits and compared them with the smaller, thinner lines of the strange weapon.

It took time, but finally he saw the break. A tiny black scratch across the engraved circuit.

He knew how that could be healed, but would it restore the gun to full efficiency? Without the tools and equipment at hand, there was no way to find out.

His concentration was broken by a scream.

He dropped the gun and sprang away from the tree, looking downstream to where Liss had made his meal. He saw that the Razoi had finished and, according to his habit, had been burying the fish remnants, head and backbone, each at the base of a tree. The scream had come from the creature which had dropped out of the tree above him and clubbed him as the bodies met.

Keepersmith now saw the attacker stand up and whirl to face the unconscious Razoi. It lifted something in both arms above its head, and he could see the gleam of steel. . . .

"No!" he shouted, and ran down the bank, drawing his sword. The figure jerked around, the sword still held high. It was a woman, dressed in a cloth tunic and wearing a sword harness. Her face was an ugly mask of hatred.

"A Man," she said. Her voice was barely a whisper, but it carried infinite menace. "A Man defending this filth. *Defend yourself, then!*"

She was barely ten centimeters shorter than he, and fast, strong and skilled. He saw that the moment her strong right wrist whipped her Smithword up for a direct slash downward. It was all he could do to parry the blow without killing her.

Her steel rang against his, slid toward his wrist, and he flipped it off the quillions. He had barely time to recover before her slash came in toward his waist.

His parry was almost too late, because she snapped her sword in mid-swing toward his legs. He fended off the slash, but rather than counterattack, he leaped backward.

"Peace!" he called. "We are not enemies!"

But he could tell from the fighting glaze in her dark eyes that she did not even hear him. He had to leap back again as her sword came up in a swoop toward his crotch.

As it passed him he leaped in and swung up his own sword with the flat turned, slapping her hand against the grip. Her weapon spun crazily away and half-buried itself in the soft turf near the river.

She faced him defiantly, shaking her injured hand, ready for the deathblow. When it didn't come at once, she glanced at where her sword lay.

"Don't think of it," Keepersmith said. "Sit down and keep still."

She did, and he saw her clearly for the first time. Her face and limbs were dirty and scratched, her long black hair a filthy, matted mane, her sandals badly worn. But there was still spirit in the eyes that watched him as he moved sideways, his sword still drawn, to where Liss was trying to sit up.

"Are you all right, Liss?"

"Mostly," said the Razoi, rubbing the back of his head and watching the woman.

"Why did you try to kill my friend?" Keepersmith asked the woman.

"Your friend? What kind of Man calls a Razoi his friend?"

"I do," he answered, quiet power in his voice. "I am called Keepersmith."

All the hatred drained from her face, and amazement took its place. "Keepersmith!" She looked at him, and he could tell that she was comparing the Man before her to everything she had heard about him. He wondered if she would challenge him, but evidently there were few Men on the plains of his stature. There was sullen respect in her voice, as she asked, "What are you doing this far south and—" She glanced at Liss. "—in such company?"

"It is not for me to answer you," he said sternly, and she dropped her eyes. "I ask you again, why did you attack my friend?"

"He is Razoi."

"That is no answer."

She raised her eyes to his face. "It is answer enough for me."



"But not for me!"

For a moment more she hesitated. Then she shrugged her shoulders, and seemed to shrink as her defiance faded and weariness washed over her.

"A band of Razoi raided my village," she told them. "I was in the fields, planting. Hilam, my husband, was working on the house—the rains were heavy last winter, and he wanted to build a new roof all made of wood.

"Hilam had insisted that I take the sword to the fields. He said the village was well enough defended, but . . . he was wrong. I heard the alarm and rushed back—but they were already gone. I found Hilam. . . ." Her voice broke, and Keepersmith did not urge her. After a moment she went on.

"I found my husband dead in the doorway of our house. And beside him . . . our son. Six summers only, and Thim had his wooden training sword in his hand. . . ."

She straightened up, and looked at Keepersmith. "I swore vengeance for the death of my family, and for days I have been on their trail. Last night I got this far. They watered here, but I was too tired to go further. I slept in that tree, and when I woke and saw a Razoi here, it seemed he had to be one of them. . . ."

Suddenly Liss spoke up, his voice angrier than Keepersmith had ever heard it. "You thought I was a ssouthern dussteater?" He stood up, but Keepersmith forestalled whatever he had planned to do.

"Liss—be still, please, she does not understand." Then to the woman, "The southern Razoi are his enemies, too. In my mountains there is peace between Men and Razoi. And this is Liss, *my friend*."

They both looked at Liss, whose usually unreadable face was working heavily as he struggled to conquer his resentment. "I have never killed a Man," he said at last. "And I *would not* kill a child." He turned away, finished burying the fish remnants, and dived into the stream.

The two Men watched him go, then the woman stood up and faced Keepersmith.

"Help me," she said.

"I have my own path to follow."

"But you are Keepersmith, the Voice of the *Hawk*, who watches over us." The reverence in her voice told him what she believed about the *Hawk*. "Give me back my sword and help me destroy the scum who killed my family!"

"No," he said. Her sorrow touched him, but he could not yield to her pleading. He was not, he reminded himself, an ordinary Man. "The

Hawk has another duty for me.

"But take your sword, in any case." He picked it up off the ground, and held it by the blunted lower third of the blade. As he offered her the hilt, he said, "I do not approve, but if vengeance will be some comfort for your loss, I will not forbid it."

She gripped the handle of the sword, but still he held it. Her eyes questioned him.

"I want your promise that you will not use this against Liss."

She looked startled, as though she wondered if Keepersmith had read her mind. "He is truly your . . . friend?"

"I have said it."

"Then . . . I will not harm him. I swear it."

He released the sword, and she sheathed it with trembling hands.

"How long since you have eaten?" he asked.

She shrugged. "A day. Two."

He gestured toward the stream. "Bathe and rest for this day. I can spare you some food."

She hesitated. "The stream—" she began. "The Razoi is there." When he said nothing, she continued heatedly, "I swore not to harm *him*—I have heard no answering promise!"

"Liss!" Keepersmith called. The Razoi appeared from the stream almost at the woman's feet. She stepped aside hurriedly as he came ashore.

"I heard," he said. He faced the woman, standing closer to her than she obviously liked. "You need not fear me. Sssmith is my friend, and your enemies are mine also. If it will ease your mind, I will stay out of the stream while you bathe."

Keepersmith and Liss walked back to their camp in silence. Keepersmith was digging in his pack for the food when a sharp cry of pain from the Razoi made him whirl around.

"What did you learn?" Liss asked, holding out the fragments of the small gun. "What did you learn by breaking it?"

"I did not break it, Liss. It was already broken inside. *That* is what I learned." He took the pieces and snapped them back together, then offered the gun to Liss. He accepted it, balancing it in his hand.

"You give me only what is worthless, as usual," he said. The bitterness in his voice surprised Keepersmith.

"Liss . . ."

"I have never ssaid it, Sssmith. Not before this. But that one—" He jerked his head downstream. "—to her I am no better than the dussteaters who sslew her people.

"You have ssaid I am your friend. Yet you do not trust me either. You are the ssame."

"No, Liss!" But the words stung.

"Then why did you give me fire, but none of the ssecret wayss Man can usse it? Why may I watch Ironblasster workh, but never be sshown how it workhss?"

"Sssmith, do you believe I would usse Ironblasster againsst you?"

Keepersmith felt a tightness in his stomach. How would he have felt in Liss's place? He could not speak; he shook his head.

"Then sstop giving me only what we khannot usse. Teach uss how to makhe potss and sswordss. How to kleep that knowledge and give it to our children. Teach uss the Writing!"

Liss was holding the gun out toward Keepersmith, clutching it desperately. His whole body was tense, his voice pleading. "Sssmith, you ssay thiss thing may mean you and your people will leave. We have sshared our world with you—sshare your learning with uss. Sssmith, do *not* leave uss ass you found uss!"

Keepersmith laid down the food and went over to his friend. In all their long acquaintance they had never touched except by accident but now, deliberately, he placed his hands on the Razoi's shoulders. They were cool and still damp from the stream.

"How often have I said that I cannot speak for only myself in these matters? The fate of all Men rests with me.

"But I swear this to you, Liss. If Men are to leave your world at last, I will do everything in my power to see that the Razoi are taught all our knowledge before we leave."

"And if there iss no message in thiss metal thing? Will it sstill be as it wass? Dribbless of nothings for the Rassoi?"

Liss's anguish crystallized the decision Keepersmith had been delaying for twenty summers.

"Then I will try to persuade the others that you can be trusted with more fire knowledge. Please understand, Liss, that is our most important secret; in that I would have to obey their wishes.

"But I will teach you Writing. I give you my promise. *Whatever* happens, I will teach you Writing."

The scaled face turned up toward Keepersmith.

"You know I have wanted thiss."

"Yes. You have been very patient. And you have been a good friend."

He released Liss, picked up the food, and walked downstream to where the woman was dressed again and sitting on the bank. They sat silently together while she ate. When she had finished, she said, "I will come with you."

"What?" Keepersmith had been staring



thoughtfully at the stream, planning how to keep his promise to Liss.

"I said I will come with you."

"Why?"

"They have too long a start. And there is nothing to go back to."

"But you don't know where we are going."

"It doesn't matter. You said it is an errand in the service of the *Hawk*—perhaps this was all . . . arranged by the *Hawk* himself so that I would be willing to help you."

"The *Hawk*," Keepersmith said quietly, "takes no responsibility for the actions of Razoi. You are here by accident,"—but for a brief moment he wondered—"and if you wish to come with me, it is your free choice and no fate decreed by the *Hawk*."

"Then by my free choice," she said, looking directly at him from a face made younger for being clean, "I will go with you."

Keepersmith looked back at the camp, where Liss was stretched out in the last patch of sunlight.

"He travels with us."

She followed his gaze.

"I have sworn not to harm him."

"It is not enough. You must trust him."

She hesitated only a moment before answering, "It is you I trust. But since you speak for him, then I trust him also."

Keepersmith nodded, and stood up to return to the campsite. "We move on at first light."

They travelled faster now, each in a separate silence. Liss led the little column and Marna brought up the rear, and both were glad of the great wall of Keepersmith between them.

Keepersmith's packed food was soon running low, and they had to pause, sometimes for a day at a time, to hunt and to gather the ferafruit that was already ripe in the warmer southern climate. They were never far from a river or stream, so that Liss was well fed. They might have asked him to catch more fish than he needed so that they could share his meal, but they respected his horrified aversion to cooked fish. So the Men snared small game and grazed the edible plants.

It was near dusk of a day so long that Keepersmith knew midsummer was very close when Liss halted abruptly. The tense attitude of his body warned them as no word could do, and Keepersmith and Marna melted into the brush at either side of the rough trail. Liss moved cautiously forward and inspected something on the ground, half-concealed by a bed of fork-leaved creepers. Then he straightened up and waved them forward.

When they stood beside him they saw what he had seen—a brownish-green hand covered with dried and flaking scales.

They dragged the body out into the clear. It was a southern Razoi. His angular face had shrunk to fit the skull, and the finely scaled body was totally dehydrated.

"How long has he been dead?" Keepersmith asked Liss.

"It iss hard to tell," answered the Razoi. "One of my people would lookh likhe thiss only a few hourss after death. But thesse ssouthern dussteatersss need lesss water. He hass been dead for many dayss."

"Then they are far enough ahead of us," said Keepersmith.

"For a time," said Liss.

"What does that mean?" demanded Marna. "This is one of the raiders who attacked my village." She touched one of the emaciated legs with her sandalled foot. "I recognize his two-toed track. Are we following them, after all?"

"Not following," said Liss. "But we are going to the ssame plasse they are."

"Why?"

"On, the *Hawk's* business," stated Keepersmith, "and I'm impatient to get it done. Liss," he gestured toward the ugly body, "do you want to bury him?"

"A *dussteater*?"

"Then there is no need to linger."

He started off down the partially cleared, winding track they had been following for

some days, leaving Liss and Marna to come after him at their own speed.

The demanding march had dulled the edge of Marna's suspicion and Liss's resentment, so that they walked now barely a meter apart in comfortable silence.

"Why don't you want to bury him?" Marna asked suddenly.

"Why sshould I?" came the answer over Liss's shoulder.

"But your people bury their dead, I have seen it..." She stopped abruptly as Liss whirled around to face her.

"He is a *dussteater*," he hissed. "He is *not* one of my people. Do you sstill not see the differensse between uss?"

Startled by the sudden confrontation, Marna held back the sharp words that came so readily to her tongue. Instead she said awkwardly, "I—I am trying to learn, Liss. I have promised Keepersmith to trust you, and I—" to her surprise, she meant it, "I do. But it's hard to trust someone you don't know."

There was a long silence as Liss's bright, wet-looking eyes stared at her steadily. Then he said, "I know what it iss to be denied knowledge. Assk what you will—I will try to ansswer. But let us sstay with Sssmith."

They walked on together, hurrying for a time to make up the few moments lost. When they could see Keepersmith's broad back a few meters ahead of them once again, they slowed their pace.

"About the burying..." began Marna.

"Yess. We bury dead things to bring them to life again."

"You mean like the fish, to—uh—"

"Fertilisse the ssoil?" He smiled at her look of surprise, revealing the double ridge of serrated bone that served him as teeth. "It is only the term that I learned from Sssmith. We have always known that buried dead flesh feedss the living things near it."

"But we do it for another reasson—to free the sspirit of the dead thing to return again."

Marna frowned in concentration. "How does burying the body of a thing—?"

"It is all one. When the flesh returnss to new growth, the sspirit returnss too. But if the flesh is abandoned, the sspirit is trapped in the dead flesh and it diess."

"But if you believe that—"

"Yess?"

"Leaving that one unburied is a horrible revenge—worse than even I would ask."

The scaled shoulders shrugged. "It iss their own khusstom. It iss one markh of their ssavagery. And it iss why they have dwindled while

my people have grown."

"But you did not abandon him out of respect for his custom?"

"No," Liss answered. "I *wanted* his spirit to die. I would destroy them all if I should."

"I know *my* reasons, Liss. But why do *you* hate them so?"

"I hate them because they are sskhangers, and live on the work of otherss, and never give anything to the earth.

"I hate them bekhause they have been our enemiess ssince before the first Men khame here.

"I hate them," he turned to look at her, "bekhause they made *you* hate *me*."

He increased his pace and moved ahead of her until he was halfway between her and Keepersmith.

She watched the iridescent scales on his back as they moved with his sinuous walk, and said softly, "I don't, Liss. Not now."

A few nights later, they had camped beside a stream, and on Liss's advice had forgone their fire. They had lost the tracks of the south-erners, and could not be sure where they were.

Keepersmith sat on a log at the edge of the water, chewing the last of their ferafruit. Something splashed nearby and he looked up to see Marna climbing out of the river. A softer splash upstream drew his attention, and in the bright silver light of the full moons, he saw Liss's shiny head appear and sink again.

"You're not afraid to swim with him now," he said, as the woman pulled her light woven tunic over her head.

"No," she answered, sitting beside him and leaning over to wring the water from her long black hair. "But I don't understand him, either. Or you."

"Me?"

"You are Keepersmith, our leader. And here you are further south than Men have gone for generations. Can't you tell me at least where we are going?"

"I gave you the chance to go your own way," he reminded her.

"And I reject it now as then," she answered hotly. Then more calmly, "But I am walking totally blind. Liss knows more than I do."

"And you resent that?"

She started to speak, paused, and began again. "A season ago I would have given you good and valid reasons why I did *not* resent it."

"And now?"

"Now I am free to admit that I do."

Suddenly Keepersmith laughed. His rich voice rumbled out over the water, bringing Liss



to the surface nearby.

"Sssss!" At the quiet sound the laughter stopped instantly. "You are sometimess a *fool*, Sssmith!"

Keepersmith's voice was choked and hardly above a whisper. "You are right, my friend. But it has been so long since I laughed." He cleared his throat. "Marna has asked me why we are here, Liss."

"Then tell her," came the crisp answer. "Softly." He ducked back under the water and was gone.

A moment later, Keepersmith handed Marna the small gun. She accepted it gingerly, astonished at the lightness and the cool touch of the metal.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Call it—a small Ironblaster. But it doesn't work."

She lifted her eyes to his face with sudden understanding. "The Words say that Ironblaster was the gift of the *Hawk*. This . . . ?"

"I don't know," he said grimly. He turned the gun in her hands so that the bright moonlight shone down on the inscription.

"This writing is the mark of the *Hawk*, but—"

She interrupted him, growing more excited as the implications struck her. "Has He . . . Is it time . . . oh, Keepersmith!"

"I have said it. I *don't know what it means!*"

He took the gun from her, gripped it tightly as doubt washed across her face.

"But—you are Keepersmith! The Ironfinder! You taught my village Smith the Words, but you alone know the Writings! You *speak* for the *Hawk*! If you don't know—"

"Then who does?" he finished for her. "No one does. But I am supposed to. It could mean whatever I say it means. But this time I cannot lie."

"Lie?"

He stood up and walked a few steps along the bank. "I have shocked you. Yes, I lie.

"When a Man asks a question, he needs an answer. Two Men each claim that this varipig

is his, or that newborn boychild isn't. Someone must decide for them.

"When is it best to plant—this day or that? Which fields should lie fallow? How many pots should we have for next season's trading?"

"An answer. A judgment. I have always offered my best judgment, but they—Macson, Yarma, Hollister, the others who have been leaders in the seasons since I became Keepersmith—they believe that the *Hawk* speaks through me."

He turned toward where she sat motionless. The fluid reflections from the river water danced across their faces. Keepersmith's was grim with strain.

"I have never spoken of this before, but I say it now: If the *Hawk* speaks through me, I cannot tell it. I have borne this burden alone."

"If this," he raised the hand with the gun in it, "is a signal of the *Hawk's* return, then I welcome it! For it will mean the end of—"

His head turned sharply at the splashing sound, but not before three-fingered hands had grabbed the ankle and thigh of the leg nearer the river, and unbalanced him. He toppled awkwardly sideways, and slapped loudly into the river.

The water churned furiously, and Keepersmith heaved himself out of the water. He stood on the floor of the river bed and tried to shake off the small yellow-green Razoi clinging to his shoulders and pinning his arms.

At the first sound, Marna had leaped across the small clearing to where she had left her sword when she went to bathe. Two Razoi rushed out from the forest and blocked her before she could reach it. She spun around and fled into the trees across the clearing.

It was dark under the vine-woven trees. The Razoi who followed her could see better than she, but she was bigger and faster. She swung up to the lowest limb of the nearest tree, waited until they had passed beneath, then dropped to the ground and ran back to the clearing.

Keepersmith was half on the bank. His arms and shoulders were bleeding badly, but his right arm was free and his sword in his hand.

She caught up her sword and whirled to face the two who had followed her. They were shorter than Liss, but wider. Their shoulders bulged with muscles, and they knew how to use their staffaxes. They rushed at her simultaneously, bringing down the axeheads in vicious overhead strokes.

She blocked the one on her right, accepting all the power of the blow on the blunted edge of her sword near the hilt. At the same time she twisted to the right. The second axehead

struck harmlessly in the grass, but swept up in a wide horizontal swing aimed at her waist. She turned her wrist to let the first wooden staff slide off the tip of her sword, and jumped backward just in time.

Then she realized she had done exactly what they wanted her to do. Keepersmith's back was unguarded!

The Razoi in the river were struggling to pull him into the water again, where they had at least some advantage. Three yellow-green bodies were floating downstream, already almost totally submerged. But three more still clung to Keepersmith, one of them pinning his left arm in such a way that Keepersmith couldn't strike at him effectively without injuring himself.

The two Razoi Marna had been fighting turned as one and ran for Keepersmith, staff-axes raised and already moving downward.

Marna charged after them, drawing from her body every ounce of speed it held. Too far!

With a last lunge she threw herself under the feet of one of them. He stumbled and went down, and the axe flew away from his hand. He surged to his knees and launched himself bare-handed at her. The weight of his compact body struck her and pinned her to the ground before she could stop rolling and get her sword free.

Through her own desperate struggle, she saw that the second Razoi had reached Keepersmith, and the deathblow was even then on its way down. . . .

A streak of green flashed between Keepersmith and the southern Razoi, and suddenly Liss was there, his staff braced and blocking that powerful blow. The sight brought her new strength as she fought the scaly creature who was trying to fasten his ridged jaws in her throat.

She brought her elbow up under the chinless, snouted face, and pushed. For a straining few seconds he resisted, then his clutching grip was broken and he was propelled off her.

As he staggered backward, her sword came up from the ground in a clean arc and sliced through his neck.

Liss had forced the smaller Razoi toward the trees. She whirled around to see him back into the broad trunk of a fera. In that brief instant of surprise, Liss turned his staff from its cross-brace and jabbed the sharpened point downward. The southerner cried out once and sank dead to the ground.

Keepersmith had killed another of the attackers. The last two knew they were beaten,



and as Liss and Marna ran toward Keepersmith, they released him and dived for the deep water in the middle of the river.

Marna halted at the shore and helped an exhausted and bleeding Keepersmith to pull himself all the way out of the water.

Liss dropped his staff and dived after the fleeing Razoi. In a few moments one of them floated to the surface a few meters downstream. Liss returned with the other one and half-dragged him out of the water. He threw the Southerner down on the bank with a hissing curse.

"Why did they attack us?" asked Keepersmith.

"You are Men, and we are nearing their stronghold. That alone would be enough reason."

"You say that as if it is not the only one," said Marna.

"They know who you are, Ssmith," Liss said. "They know that the Men would be easier prey without you. And they wanted your swordss."

"They know me? How?"

"Bekhausse they know me, and there iss only one Man who would be with me." He turned to his prisoner, cutting off their questions. "None of the otherss eskhaped. But this one will lead uss where we musts go."

Keepersmith looked at him in surprise. "You told me you knew where it was."

"No," Liss corrected him. "I do know *where* it is—in a valley in the southern mountainss. But there is only one entranse to the valley, and it iss well hidden. I ssaid that I khould lead you there."

"And if you hadn't captured a dusteater to find the entrance for you? How had you planned to lead us through the hidden entrance?"

"I planned," Liss answered steadily, "to khapture a dussteater to find the entranse."

And now it was Marna who laughed, a clear mellow sound, and Keepersmith joined her.

Soon after that the ground began to rise sharply. They marched faster, stopping only briefly. The southern Razoi maintained a surly silence except when Liss addressed him directly. Then he answered with fear and grudging respect in his ugly scaled face.

Keepersmith and Marna had dressed their wounds with mud and herb poultices, which dried and cracked off within two days, leaving only faint red lines in their skin.

As soon as the land left the level, the ground began to dry out and it wasn't long before they

were trudging through a rising, stone-littered desert. Keepersmith had never been this far south, and he asked Liss about the terrain.

"Thesse mountainss are the ssame as ourss. They run from our valleyss far to the wesst, then turn back southward. The wind bringss the rainfall from the south and easst, and the mountainss sstop it here. Beyond the mountainss iss dessert. No Rassoi hass ever khossed it."

Besides being much drier, these mountains were higher and more forbidding than Keepersmith's. The little party was climbing steadily toward one great sheer cliff which stood out above a group of smaller hills.

At last Liss paused, stopping their prisoner with a sharp word.

"The entranse to their valley iss here ssomewhere," he told them.

"Then let's rest before we go in," suggested Marna. "We have been running on little food, and you need some water, Liss."

The Razoi did indeed look uncomfortable. The dry dusty heat had made the Men sweat profusely, but it was not the heat but the dusty air that affected Liss. His skin was dried out until the tiny scales looked separate and brittle, and he was breathing rapidly.

But he said, "No. I thank you, Marna, but there must be water in the valley if even this," he gestured toward their prisoner and used the Razoi word Keepersmith had heard before, "khan survive."

When he heard that word applied to him, the southern Razoi cried out and threw himself at Liss, his clawed hands reaching for the taller one's throat.

Liss was ready for him. He stepped aside and grabbed one of the arms, spinning the southerner off balance. Then he whipped his other arm around the stocky yellowish neck and applied pressure. He grabbed up his staff and flipped it around to that its point was aimed at one of the creature's eyes. He hissed something in his own language, barely loudly enough for his captive to hear it. After a moment the snouted head nodded very slightly.

Liss released him and let him fall to the ground.

"He needed more persuassion," said Liss. "He will lead uss now."

The southerner stood up, rubbing his throat, and led the way off to the left. For several minutes he wound in and out of the rocks. Then suddenly he darted away.

Liss was right after him, and the two Razoi

disappeared into the maze of rocks. The Men could hear clattering stones and the sounds of a struggle, but could not be sure of their direction.

Then they heard a high-pitched cry, and in a few moments Liss appeared, panting heavily. "Thiss way."

They followed him, and paused for a moment beside the dead body of the Razoi prisoner.

"He tried to get through and warn the otherss," Liss said. "I give him honor for that." He looked at Marna. "When it iss over, I will bury thiss one."

Beyond them was a narrow crack in what seemed to be an otherwise solid wall of stone. Liss's slim body slipped through it easily, but the two Men had to literally scrape themselves through the rough-edged opening. Beyond it was a space large enough for Keepersmith and Marna to walk upright, a short corridor which ended in sunlight. They looked out into the valley.

It was an awesome place.

It was roughly triangular, and it stretched before them for several hundred meters. At its far end loomed the mountain that had been their landmark. It towered over the valley a kilometer high, and it seemed perfectly smooth along the top half of its face. The valley widened and sloped sharply upward to meet the mountain until it seemed, crazily, that it was the valley which braced up and supported that vast ominous cliff.

Fed by the little rainfall the cliff drained off the passing clouds, and by underground springs which carried the melting snow from the high regions further west, the floor of the valley was green. But the growth was wild, untended.

Keepersmith's practiced eye could see that the valley could support no more than three hundred Razoi, and even that number would require an unusually large stock of fish in the one surface river. It ran the length of the valley and fed into an opening in the mountainside, not twenty meters from where they stood.

They did not expect to find sentries—the concealed entry was protection enough for the valley. Still they moved cautiously toward the river, and Marna and Keepersmith stood watch while Liss dived gratefully into the water. When he climbed out again a few moments later, his skin was already returning to its natural luminous green.

"Now, Liss," asked Keepersmith. "We are here. Where is the metal room?"

Marna started, but did not interrupt. Soon enough she would have answers.

Liss pointed toward the cliff.

"You ssee where the valley rissess, and khlmbss the fassse of the mountain?" Keepersmith nodded. "The dussteaters live in holess along that lowesst ridge. Above their holess the way iss steeper, but sstill possible. Below the khrest of that nekhsst ridge—" They followed his directing arm, tracking the way with their eyes. "You ssee that darkh sspot? It iss the mouth of a khvae. Insside iss where he found the ssmall Ironblasster-like thing."

"In the metal room."

"Yess."

They moved off along the edge of the valley. They had worked their way almost to the foot of the slope when a whistling sound cut through them. Marna made an odd noise and slumped to the ground.

Suddenly twenty southern Razoi came pouring down from the ridge. Above them, protected by the edge of the ridge, others were shouting and swinging strips of hide which cast stones at them.

"Back up the side of the slope!" shouted Keepersmith as he drew his sword... and Ironblaster. Liss did not hesitate, but bent down to the ground and with surprising strength





lifted Marna in his arms and went scrambling back up the rocky hillside they had just left. Rocks from the slings rained around them, but his route was fast and erratic, and he made it to the shelter of a group of tall rocks.

There he left Marna. With a word of apology, he took her sword and slid back down to Keepersmith.

The rain of rocks stopped near Keepersmith, for the southerners did not want to disable their own fighters. But he was hard pressed in personal combat, surrounded by waist-high, snarling Razoi and their deadly axes. He needed all his skill merely to defend himself, and even so his living attackers already had to step over dead ones to get at him.

Liss burst into the fray like a whirlwind. Even in that turbulent moment, Keepersmith gained a new understanding. For the sword Liss held was no more strange to him than his own staffaxe. He used it everywhere to its greatest advantage. How long had he been studying it, waiting to own his first sword?

Taken aback by the suddenness and unexpected nature of Liss's attack, the southerners fell back momentarily.

"Break it off, Liss," called Keepersmith. "There are too many of them."

"Then you must use Ironblaster!" Liss shouted in return. "Go! I will hold them!"

There was no time for Keepersmith to argue his friend's sacrifice. Keepersmith turned and ran down the center of the valley, luring some of the southern Razoi after him. His long legs easily outdistanced them, and as he ran, he pulled a pair of goggles out of their pocket near Ironblaster's holster, and put them on. The lenses had come with Ironblaster from the Hawk.

Wearing them, he turned and raised Ironblaster, and the pursuing Razoi stumbled to a panicked stop.

Even at this range, Keepersmith could not

use Ironblaster on the Razoi themselves. The explosion of the water in their bodies, turned instantly into superheated steam by Ironblaster's tremendous power, would consume him.

Through the goggle lenses, Keepersmith saw the valley exactly as it had been. But the sun... the sun high overhead was a molten black disc.

He glanced quickly at the mountain towering over him. Along the third and final ridge, the coloring of the rock was different, and all his experience told him that the formation was unstable. If he could disturb it enough to jar loose a landslide...

Sick at heart for what he was doing, sorry for the death he would cause but seeing no other way out, and knowing full well that he might be destroying the very answers he sought, Keepersmith aimed Ironblaster at the middle of that third rise of land, some twenty meters below the dark opening which Liss had told him was the entrance to the metal room.

"NOW, LISS!" he warned, and Liss dived away from the southern fighters, who had been startled motionless by the giant voice echoing through the valley. He ran for the shelter of rocks where he had left Marna. He knelt beside her and pressed his face into the rock, covering his head with his arms.

Marna stirred, and moaned. Liss hissed urgently, "Your eyes! Khover your eyes!"

She sat up and looked out into the valley. She saw Keepersmith standing in the clear, aiming Ironblaster upward...

With a cry of terror, she copied Liss.

And Ironblaster roared.

The valley shook with the thunder of it, and Keepersmith could not hear the cries of pain. Every southern Razoi in the valley went instantly blind as Ironblaster's lightning reached up to drag down the mountain.

To Keepersmith it was a clean, straight black line that stretched upward to the face of the mountain. Where it struck, a small black sun bloomed, and moved across the ridge at Keepersmith's command.

To Marna, who raised her head to look in brief, careful glimpses out into the valley, that black line was a searing bolt of light. She did not know, as Keepersmith did, that Ironblaster had been designed primarily for use at great distance in airless space, not to waste a part of its terrible energies heating atmosphere to blinding incandescence. She only knew that the passing filled her mind with fire, and she did not dare to look to where it struck the rock.

The black sun crept along the mountainside,

melting a shallow groove in its wake. Then it died.

Keepersmith lowered Ironblaster and removed his goggles.

But the thunder still rang in the valley, rumbling in the stone itself, beneath their feet, all around . . . above . . .

"Liss!" Keepersmith shouted. "Marna! Run this way!"

The two figures scrambled down to the valley floor and ran desperately away from the shaking wall which towered above them. They reached Keepersmith. He turned and ran with them.

For Ironblaster had indeed disturbed the balance of the mountain. Along the narrow groove, vertical cracks were snaking downward, shaking the lower ridge and breaking off great monoliths which toppled outward and skidded down the hillside, dragging loose surface shale with it.

The three ran to the end of the valley, then they turned to watch as the massive weight of the second ridge sagged downward with a thunder not even Ironblaster could match, crushing and collapsing the tiny caves where the southerners had lived.

As the ground slipped away below the gaping, smoking wound, the ridge above it slowly shattered. Great crumbs of rock caromed wildly downward, setting off new landslides until the entire surface of the newly formed, unstable slope was in motion again.

Of this the watchers could only guess from the deafening, ground-shaking noise. For the tortured mountainside had vomited a great cloud of dust to shield its dying.

The sounds diminished slowly, and at last there was utter silence. Taking its own time, a gentle breeze blew the dust clouds away.

And when the dust had cleared, the three of them could only stare for long minutes.

Up there, in the mountainside, above where Keepersmith had made his cut with Ironblaster, the thousands of tons of rock had slid away to reveal a vast metal wall curving outward from the cliff face. Its silver-gray, dusty surface gleamed dully in the sunlight, stretching nearly a hundred meters along the rocky face, and standing over a third as high.

There was one small, doorlike opening in it.

At last Keepersmith turned to Liss. "That is not the metal room the southerner spoke of."

"No," answered Liss. "He ssaid that it wass small, barely ass tall ass you and very sshallow. That—"

There was much awe in his voice that he

could not continue.

"That," echoed Keepersmith, "must be the answer I have been sent here to find."

"Sshall we go with you?" asked Liss, his eagerness so plain that Keepersmith turned a face full of pain to him.

"Not this time, Liss. It is a secret I must understand alone—at least for now."

There were many things he wanted to say to these people who had shared his food and his peril for a long, wild summer. But he merely turned away and began to climb toward the giant shining secret that waited above him.

Liss and Marna watched as his huge figure grew smaller. They suffered helplessly as Keepersmith toiled his way up to the first ridge and then to the second, often falling, always getting up again.

At last the toy Man stood beside the dark opening in the metal wall. He stepped into it, and disappeared. For several minutes they watched anxiously, but when nothing happened, they relaxed their vigil and rested on the ground beside the mud-choked river.

A loud metallic sound rang through the valley, and Marna leaped to her feet screaming.

"The opening is gone, Liss! I can't even tell where it was! Liss—the thing has swallowed Keepersmith!"

Liss, too, was disturbed. But he had known this Man longer than the woman had. So he calmed her as best he could. "He knowss what he iss doing, your Kheepersssmith. He will be backh. And he ssaid it—it iss a thing he musst do alone. We khan't help him now. We musst wait."

"Wait?" She realized that it was indeed their only choice. "Of course, we must wait for him, Liss. Wait and watch."

Just after the sun rose on the third day, the door in the metal wall opened and Keepersmith stepped out. The door closed again behind him.

He walked back to them out of the dawn, carrying a black box and a small gray metal container. His powerful frame had thinned and his face was drawn and weary, but in his eyes there was a new wisdom.

"We are going back," he said.

Liss and Marna stared at him.

"Tell uss," said Liss. "Please tell uss."

Keepersmith opened his mouth, but hesitated. Liss turned bitterly away.

"It iss the ssame," he said. "I am a Rassoi!"

"No, Liss." Marna reached out and touched Liss's arm lightly. "I am a Man, and the secrets

of the *Hawk* are not for me either. Only the Keepersmith can know them."

Suddenly Keepersmith spoke in a voice barely above a whisper. "No more." They waited.

"All Men must know what I have learned here. We have lived in the shadow of error for centuries.

"The *Hawk* is not a god, Marna. It is only a machine which carried Men through the space between planets—" His eyes looked through them and they knew his was seeing something in his mind, a memory carried out of the place of secrets.—"between stars.

"The *Hawk* brought our people here; that much is true. But it will never return. Because it never left.

"That—" he said, gesturing toward the great metal wall shimmering in the new sunlight, "*That is the Hawk!*"

"I don't understand," wailed Marna. "Why—?"

"They didn't understand either, Marna. Our ancestors were warriors. Ironblaster found its true destiny here, for it was built for killing! The *Hawk* landed, and some of the Men took Ironblaster and went out into this world searching for their enemies. They came back—and the *Hawk* was gone."

Liss gestured with one three-fingered hand toward the distant metal wall. "But you just said . . ."

"That was the error. It didn't leave. It was just that our people could not find it when they returned.

"It must have happened suddenly. One Man was still in the airlock—that was the small metal room, Liss. The door leading into the ship was closed and locked. The outer door was open.

"And then the whole mountainside, disturbed perhaps by the shock of the *Hawk's* landing, at last gave way and slid down to bury the *Hawk* from the sight of Men. There may have been others outside. If so, they have been

buried under that rock for centuries.

"There were only two on the ship itself, the Man in the airlock and one other, sealed helplessly inside. This Man was hurt, and she died soon after—but she has left us this." He held up the metal cylinder. "It is a kind of Writing. A speech Writing. It tells much, and there is even more to learn."

He did not mention the two long racks of Ironblasters that he had seen within the ship; that was knowledge that could be held until later.

"And our ancestors were the fighting Men who had been sent away from the *Hawk*?"

"Yes, and they too left a Writing. The one that we have lived by. They believed that their ship had flown off for some reason, but would return when it could. They wanted us to be ready when it came back. We have been waiting for centuries," his voice tightened, "for a machine that has been buried at our feet!"

Out of the silence that followed came Marna's voice. "What—what will you do?"

"I will tell them the truth. Whatever fate brought me here, I *have* learned the lesson of the *Hawk*."

"And what is that, Sssmith?"

"That the waiting is truly at an end. In a sense, the *Hawk* has returned, and now we must save ourselves. We must stop merely surviving and begin to grow." Again he held up the black box and the cylinder. "With these we can start to learn all the lost knowledge of the *Hawk*."

He looked deliberately at Liss.

"We will *all* learn."

"Your people," whispered Liss. "Will they agree?"

"They will," said the big man as he stepped between his friends and led the way out of the Valley of the Hawk.

"I am still Keepersmith."



THE MAGICIAN'S APPRENTICE

by Barry B. Longyear
illustrated by Freff

For over two centuries—ever since it had been settled by survivors from a circus space-ship—Momus developed in its own way. But now . . .

Yudo and his two brothers stood looking at their grain field. Green only the day before, it now lay brown and withered. Yudo nodded. "It is the power of Rogor. Your tongue angered him, Arum."

"Bah!" Arum bent over and pulled up a handful of the brown plants, then held them over his head. "Rogor! Since the circus ship brought our ancestors to Momus, we have served no man. . . ."

"Arum!" Yudo held up his hands and looked with horror at his brother Lase.

Lase stood next to Arum and grabbed his arm. "Would you bring down more of this upon us?"

Arum shook off his brother's hand. Throwing the withered plants on the ground, Arum turned to his two brothers. "A fine pair you make. Look at you shaking in your sandals."

Lase wrung his hands, looked to Yudo, then back at Arum. "We are barkers by tradition, Arum. Perhaps we should go to Tarzak and be barkers again."

Arum shook his head. "As I said, a fine pair." He held out his arms, indicating the fields belonging to the three. "After all our work you would have us fetch and carry pitches for others?" Arum put his hands on his hips. "We are men of property. No carnival trickster will change that. . . ."

Lase and Yudo watched as Arum grabbed at his own face and his red and purple striped robe burst into flames. In seconds, Arum lay dead, his body burned beyond recognition. Then, it disappeared.

"Arum!" Yudo took a step toward the spot where his brother had been standing, but stopped as a figure clad in black and scarlet appeared on the spot. Its face was hidden by a hood. "Rogor!"

The figure pointed at Lase. "Arum offended me. Do you believe as he believed?"



Lase clasped his hands together and bowed. "No, Great Rogor. Spare me."

"Lase, you would do my bidding?"

"Yes, Great Rogor."

"Then, go to all the towns in Emerald Valley and tell them to go to Ris. They are to wait there until I appear."

"Yes, Great Rogor."

"Then, go." Lase looked at Yudo, back at Rogor, then began running across the field toward Ikona. Rogor turned toward Yudo. "For you, barker, I have an important task. Go to the fountain in Ikona. Your instructions are there." Yudo closed his eyes and nodded. When he opened them, Rogor was gone.

Eight days later, far to the south in Tarzak, a young girl looked nervously at a great magician's door. Its black and scarlet curtain hung motionless in the noon sun, while the reflection from the whitewashed adobe hurt her eyes. Making her decision, she clenched her fists, held her arms straight at her sides, and marched through the door. Inside, she found herself standing next to a tall, sad-faced barker. He was dusty and smelled of the road. At the back of the small room, a tiny old man in black-and-scarlet robe sat on a low stool, supporting himself by gripping a heavy, gnarled staff. The old man nodded at the Barker.

"A moment, Yudo, while I find out who my hasty visitor is." The old man raised his eyebrows at the girl.

"Fyx, I am Crisal. I—I didn't know you had company."

"I suppose, Crisal, it would have been too much trouble to call to the house. Never mind, little fortune teller. What brings you?"

"Fyx, I would be a magician."

The old magician looked the girl over from the top of her unkempt tangle of red hair to her dusty bare feet. "First, you are a girl; second, you are obviously of the fortune tellers; third, you are rude. Why should I apprentice you to the magician's trade?"

"First, Fyx, women have been magicians before. Myra of Kuumic played the Great Square here in Tarzak only yesterday."

The old man nodded. "Rare, but it has been done. But, Myra is the daughter of a magician. Explain that blue robe you wear—at least, I think it's blue under all that dirt."

"I am of the Tarzak fortune tellers. My mother is Salina. I told her as I told you, I *choose* to be a magician. I have completed my apprenticeship; no one can force me to be a

fortune teller." Crisal folded her arms, her nose in the air.

"Salina, eh?" Fyx scratched his head, then rubbed his chin. "You say you told this to Salina?"

"Aye."

"And what did the Great Salina say to you?"

"She said my life was my own and to do with it what I choose."

The corners of Fyx's mouth went down as his eyebrows went up. "She did? And your father, Eeren?"

Crisal frowned. "He was not understanding."

"I see. Now, about the third thing: your rudeness. Not even my own sons addressed me simply as 'Fyx'."

Crisal cocked her head to one side. "You insist?"

The old man nodded. "Try it once."

The girl bowed, loading her voice with sarcasm scraped from the floor. "Great Fyx."

"I see your respect would be more of a burden to both of us than your rudeness. And, now for the important part. Why should I take you on?"

Crisal smiled. "I know how you do your trick of the missing card."

The old man nodded, smiled, and pointed to a cushion next to his table. "Sit there, Crisal, and we will talk later. I don't want to hold up my visitor's business any longer." Walking in front of the barker, Crisal approached the table and sat on the designated cushion.

The barker bowed. "Great Fyx, is this something to say in front of the child?" Yudo pointed at Crisal.

Fyx looked at her, then turned back to the Barker. "The little beast is my apprentice, Yudo. She is held under my vow of confidence, which is something she *will* respect!" Fyx turned back to the girl. Crisal nodded, and smiled.

Yudo shrugged. "As you say, Great Fyx. Will you come to Ikona?" Crisal saw fear in the barker's eyes, but it was not fear of Fyx.

"And you say the fee is twenty thousand movills?"

"In advance." Yudo pointed at the stack of bags on the floor.

Fyx nodded. "A handsome sum. We were interrupted before you said what I must do for it."

"Ikona is a farming village, Great Fyx, and our crops die. . ."

Fyx held up his hand. "Save your coppers, Yudo. I am a magician, not a farmer."

"The crops die, Great Fyx, because of a

magician. Rogor the Black One."

"Rogor . . . I have heard of this one, but he calls himself a sorcerer, not a magician."

Yudo bowed his head. "You all call upon the same dark spirits. Ikona has no place else to turn for help." The barker reached into his robe and brought forth an envelope. "The Dark One made this appear at the fountain in Ikona. It is addressed to you."

Fyx opened the envelope and squinted at the sheet of paper inside. Lifting his head, he turned to Crisal. "Fortune tellers do not read, do they?"

"I do."

Fyx held out the letter. The girl stood and walked to the old magician and took the letter. "Read it aloud."

Crisal held the paper to the light and began: "To Fyx, ancient and worthless patriarch of the Tarzak Magicians, Greetings. A fool from Ikona will ask you to come and do battle with me in my Deepland kingdom. He is a fool because he asks you; you are the bigger fool if you accept."

"Stay in the city, carnival trickster, and stay safe. In the Deeplands, I rule without challenge, for I have the power of Momus at my hands." Crisal looked at Fyx. "It is signed 'ROGOR' in a strange way."

"Strange how?"

"In a cross; look."

Fyx looked at the bottom of the sheet and saw the signature in bold letters:

R
O
R O G O R
O
R

"What does it mean, Fyx?"

The magician frowned. "It is a palindrome; a word that reads the same frontwards or backwards. Other than that, it means nothing."

Yudo shook his head. "Great Fyx, it is the Dark One's sign. Show disrespect to it in Ikona, and your crops die. You then must pay Rogor to leave you be."

Fyx looked at a dark spot on the ceiling. "... ancient and worthless patriarch . . ." He turned his gaze on the barker. "Yudo, you fool, a bigger fool accepts your offer. Tell that to Rogor."

"I cannot. No one knows where Rogor lives."

Fyx shrugged. "How, then, am I supposed to do battle with the fumble-fingered Dark One?"

Yudo trembled. "Please, Great Fyx. Express

your discourtesies after I have left." The barker bowed and backed out through the door. Fyx looked into Crisal's eyes.

"In the barker's eyes, what did you see?"

"Fear. As though Rogor could reach down and pluck him from your house if he chose."

The old magician nodded. Standing, he hobbled over to a chest, opened it and pulled out a black and scarlet robe. He handed it to the girl. "Wash, then put this on. There is a pool in back of the house. We will leave before light tomorrow for the Deeplands."

The next evening at the midway fire to Tieras, Crisal lifted her weary head from the sand and looked over her aching feet at the old magician. Fyx tested the many wads of cobit he had baking around the fire, and finding one done to his satisfaction, he put it into Crisal's sack. "There, that should keep us to Miira when they're all done." The girl let her head fall back to the sand.

"Fyx, aren't you tired? We've been walking all day."

The magician cackled. "So, apprentice, you are ready to end the day, are you?"

"You aren't?"

"I would be a poor master, Crisal, if I failed to give you your lessons."

"Lessons?"

Fyx nodded and dropped the remaining cobit cakes into the sack. "Sit up."

Crisal pushed herself up and sat crosslegged in front of the magician. Before her was a rock, and on the rock was a feather. Fyx sat across the rock from her. "What must I do?"

"Turn the feather over without your fingers. Touch it only with your mind."

Crisal frowned. "I don't understand."

"Look." Fyx pointed at the feather and turned it over as easily as if he had used his fingers. Again, he turned it back. "As a fortune teller's apprentice, you were taught to see as the fortune tellers see, with an extra pair of eyes. Now you must learn to use your extra pair of hands."

Crisal stared at the feather. "This is not a trick?"

"No. It is something you must learn, however, before you can do the better tricks and illusions. Try it."

Crisal fixed her eyes on the white feather, held her breath, grunted, went bug-eyed and began growing blue in the face. It didn't move. Letting her breath out, she shook her head. "It didn't move."

"Pick it up and feel it; rub it against your

face. Your mind doesn't know what it's trying to do yet, and you must teach it." Crisal picked up the feather and felt its smoothness with her fingers and with her face. "Place in on the rock and try again."

The girl put down the feather, looked at it through almost closed eyes and imagined tiny hands reaching under and gripping the feather's edge. With her mind she felt resistance as though she were attempting to lift a great rock plate. Heaving against the weight, she strained until she slumped forward letting out her breath. The feather lifted and fluttered to the sand. "Did I . . . ?"

"No, child. You blew it off the rock. But, I saw it rock before it took flight. You have done well for your first try."

Crisal shook her head. "It seemed so heavy."

The old magician placed the feather back on the rock. "If you had never walked before, your body would seem an unbearable weight to your legs. With practice you will gain strength."

She frowned at the feather, then placed her finger on it holding it tight against the rock. Fyx smiled a toothless grin and pointed again at the feather. Crisal jumped as she felt it pulled from beneath her finger. "It is no trick then!"

"No trick."

"Fyx, is this one of those dark spirits Yudo said you and Rogor call upon?"

The old man picked up the feather and tucked it in Crisal's robe. "Child, the power you call upon to move the feather is your own. Only you can say if it is dark. Prepare for sleep. I want to make Tieras by nightfall tomorrow."

Fyx turned back to the fire, while Crisal scooped holes in the sand for her hip and shoulder. As she settled in, resting her head against her hand, she saw the magician looking into the fire much as her mother would look for secrets in a glass sphere. The old man's eyes showed fear, but more than that, they showed sadness. About to ask a question of him, he turned and looked into her eyes. Crisal's mind grew cloudy, then blank.

The next evening, as they reached the outskirts of the desert town of Tieras, Crisal watched as the occasional farmer or workman would put his chores aside to stand and bow toward them. Fyx would return the greeting with no more than a curt nod, which was more communication than Crisal had had with him since leaving the fire. During their walk, her

fortune teller's eyes revealed little of the future, but much about her master's apprehension. Each step toward Ikona seemed to deepen the creases in the old magician's face.

"Will we stop here, Fyx?"

Fyx looked at her as though realizing for the first time that the girl had been walking beside him all day. "What was that?"

"It is toward night, and we are in Tieras. Where will we stop?"

Fyx looked around, then nodded. "Yes, we have made good time. Have you kin here?"

Crisal nodded. "My aunt, Diamind, lives here with her brother Lorca. Should we sleep under a roof tonight?"

Fyx pointed at the dark clouds gathering in the west. "One does not need the eyes of a fortune teller to divine the meaning of that."

The girl frowned. "I'm not sure we would be welcome, Fyx. Diamind is my father's sister, and they think much the same."

"About you becoming a magician?"

"Aye. Surely the Great Fyx must have an admiring trickster in Tieras that can be imposed upon."

"Perhaps." As they crossed a small stone bridge spanning a muddy creek, Fyx pointed his stick toward a dark, narrow alley. They turned from the bridge into the alley and could barely walk side by side from the closeness of the walls. Reaching a black and scarlet striped curtain, Fyx stopped and pounded his stick against the wall. "Ho, the house! This is Fyx and an apprentice. Are you there, Vassik?"

The curtain opened exposing an old woman dressed in the scarlet and black cuffs of a magician's assistant. "Fyx, is it you?"

"Aye, Bianice. Is Vassik in? Is he well?"

"Please, enter." Fyx and Crisal followed the old woman into her table room. Seated on a cushion before the table was, what seemed to Crisal, the oldest man alive. "Vassik, it is Fyx and an apprentice."

The ancient's face broke into smiles. "Fyx? Fyx, is it?"

"Aye, Vassik. This is my new apprentice, Crisal." Fyx shoved the girl toward the old man.

"Crisal? Come here, child." Crisal stood next to the old man while he gently passed his hands over her face and body. "Fyx, your eyes are worse than mine. This is a girl!"

"My apprentice, all the same, Vassik. How much would you charge for the use of your roof tonight?"

Vassik shook his head. "For you, Fyx, a special rate. What brings you to Tieras? Sit, sit."

Crisal and Fyx lowered themselves to cushions at Vassik's table. Bianice left the room and returned with hot cake, cheese and wine, then seated herself next to Vassik.

"We go to the Deeplands, Ikona."

"Ah, yes."

"You have heard of their troubles then?"

"I'm blind, not deaf, Fyx. Black Rogor is feared even this far south. What have you to do with him?"

"Ikona has hired me to rid them of the sorcerer."

Vassik nodded, then rubbed his chin. "How do you plan to do this?"

"I have no plan, Vassik. I only have my knowledge that whatever powers he has do not come from the beyond."

"Well said, but I don't hear as much conviction as there should be. Do you have doubts?"

Fyx shrugged. "Not all is known, and it has been many years since Rogor and I last met."

Vassik waved a hand at Bianice. "Take Fyx's apprentice out to the kitchen to help bring in the food. We would talk alone." The old man dropped two copper movills on the table.

Bianice rose; and Crisal looked at Fyx, who nodded at her. The girl stood and followed the magician's assistant out of the room. When they stood on the other side of the curtain, Bianice grabbed Crisal's arm. "Girl, why do you wear the black and scarlet?"

"To be a magician." The girl tried to free her arm but couldn't. "It's not as if you are paying for this information."

"Fyx uses you for his own ends, child. Do you know what you are getting into?"

"How do you know so much about my master?"

Bianice snorted out a laugh. "Just as you are apprenticed to Fyx, many years ago Vassik was Fyx's master."

Crisal shrugged. "What has that to do with me, or with our mission in the Deeplands?"

Bianice shook her head. "Vassik had three apprentices then: Fyx, Dorstan, and Amanche. Of the three apprentices, Dorstan was the best and soon became the special pride of Vassik. But, Dorstan died and the blame fell on Amanche. He was exiled into the desert from the company of man. You see, Fyx, Amanche and Dorstan were brothers."

"I still don't see . . ."

"Oh, child! Amanche is Rogor! You, child, are a film of vapor waiting to be caught between a sledge and anvil."

As the sun broke over the horizon the next

morning, its rays stole across the chilly desert, reflected from the river alongside the road to Porse and warmed the brush and trees beginning on the opposite side of the road. The low hills upon which they grew signaled the start of the incline that would become the Snake Mountains soon after Crisal and her master left Miira. Trudging behind Fyx, Crisal noticed neither the scenery nor the scent of the rain-washed air. She watched only the back of the old man and his stick, plodding toward Porse.

"Fyx." The magician continued as though he hadn't heard. Crisal moved beside him and looked him in the face. "Fyx, is Rogor your brother?"

Fyx looked at her then returned his attention to the road. "It is none of your concern."

"Oh, none of my concern, is it? Then, why am I here?"

"It was your choice."

Crisal fell back and shifted her sack to her other shoulder. After a few more moments of walking, she reached within her robe and withdrew a clear glass marble. Holding it in her left hand in a manner to catch the sun's rays, she stared deep within the tiny sphere. Raw, random patterns in her mind associated, abstracted and drew conclusions, but with little information and Crisal's inexperience, the future was hidden. The past, however, was clear. Fyx had no desire for an apprentice; Fyx wanted Crisal's eyes—the eyes of a fortune teller. Again she moved beside the old man.

"Fyx."

The magician shook his head. "What is it now, pest?"

"What will happen when we reach Ikona?"

"I'm no fortune teller, Crisal. Haven't you consulted your ball?"

Crisal frowned. "Have you eyes in the back of your head, old man?"

Fyx cackled. "No, child, no. But, I can turn my head without moving my hood."

Crisal smiled, then shook her head. "I see nothing past our present footsteps, Fyx. My glass did tell me you wanted me for my eyes, and not as an apprentice. Explain."

Fyx frowned, darted a glance at the girl, then looked ahead. Then, looking down, he cackled. "Your eyes see guilt in me?"

"Aye. That, and fear and sadness."

The magician nodded. "Rogor, the one called black and dark, he is my brother, Amanche. I learned this years ago from the Great Tayla."

"She is my mother's mother, which you knew."

"Aye, that is true. You also know of my brother Dorstan's death?"

"Bianice mentioned it."

Fyx nodded. "Dorstan was better than any of us. The exercise with the feather, the first time, he lifted it from the table and held it for half a minute." Crisal saw Fyx's eyes moisten. "He was quick and all of us knew he would be a master before either I or Amanche perfected our simplest drills. Amanche was jealous with an envy and hatred that knew no bounds. Then one day, Dorstan was found dead."

"How?"

Fyx shrugged. "Amanche told Vassik that Dorstan had challenged him and that his magic was the more powerful of the two. He expected praise, but Vassik threw him before the town of Tieras for judgment. He was exiled to the desert. Tayla, the fortune teller heard the story once and concluded that Dorstan had been poisoned."

"There was no magic, then?"

Fyx stopped and faced Crisal. "Child, there is no magic. This one who calls himself Rogor did not use magical powers against my brother Dorstan, because no such powers exist!"

Crisal's face wrinkled in confusion. "But Fyx, I myself have heard you call upon spirits in performance. . . ."

"The act, child. The act. Ever since chance brought our ancestors to Momus on the circus ship *Baraboo*, magicians have had but one trade: to entertain. We do the possible and make it appear to be the impossible. As part of the illusion that we do magic, we burn incense, call upon mythical beings and spirits, mutter nonsense incantations, roll our eyes, wave wands—all to create an aura of mystery. We take that doubt that rests in all of us, that things may not be as they appear, magnify it, and walk home with our purses full of movills."

"But, what about the feather? This is not magic?"

"No more than your fortune teller's eyes. When you see the future, do you use magic?"

"Of course not. Things in motion take certain paths. If you know the path up to the present, it takes no magic to see where a thing will go in the future."

The old man nodded. "But, child, this power of the fortune tellers seems to be magic to those who do not understand it."

Crisal nodded. "Only fortune tellers have this power. But what powers do magicians have?"

Fyx shook his head. "Many have the powers

of magicians and fortune tellers, child, but only few train their powers. You are of the fortune tellers, yet you rocked the feather. I can see enough of the future to have sense enough to step out of the path of a falling rock. A trained magician can confuse the minds of others, or even put them to sleep as I did to you our first night on the road."

Crisal frowned. "I can get to sleep under my own power, Fyx. That does not explain the feather."

"With the magician's extra pair of hands, objects can be moved. The best card tricks are aided in that manner. Someday you will be able to put pictures in the minds of others or make time seem to pass very slowly for them. You will be practicing your trade, but others will think it magic."

Crisal nodded and they continued their walk down the road. "A few things are explained, then, Fyx. Are there other powers?"

"You shall learn of them in good time."

Crisal turned her head toward the old man. "The fear I read in your face; is it that Rogor plays upon your own doubts of dark powers?"

Fyx nodded. "I cannot reconcile what I know with what I feel. Rogor is never seen and no one knows the location of his lair. Yet, he destroys entire crops at will and is said to cause illness and death by wishing it. Are there dark powers that serve Rogor? I cannot prove that there aren't."

"But, the guilt, Fyx; why do I see guilt?"

"You are of the Tarzak fortune tellers, Crisal. That I should become an agent to you betraying your tradition. . . ."

"That's not it! You think me stupid because I am young."

Fyx cackled and shook his head. "My apologies, little beast." He reached into his robe and dropped a movill into Crisal's hand.

"You think one is enough?"

"Look upon it as the balance of the respect you owe me."

Crisal dropped the copper into her purse and looked sideways at the old magician. "I haven't forgotten my question."

"I suspected as much."

"Well?"

Fyx's face became serious, and his pace slowed, then stopped. "Crisal, I do not know what I am going to meet in Ikona. I have my tricks and illusions, but they don't tell me how Rogor kills by wishing. I need a fortune teller's eyes to see the things I cannot. But. . . ."

"But, you fear throwing a child into a battle between you and your brother." Fyx nodded.

Crisal walked a few steps, and then turned back to face the old man. "I see something else, Fyx."

"And?"

"I see you arranging this with my mother, Salina. Yes, and Eeren, my loving father, providing the proper amount of disapproval to insure my choice—hah! My choice. Bianice spoke the truth. I am used."

Fyx shrugged. "Eeren and Salina are my friends, and they know of Rogor. You were selected from among all their apprentices as the best..."

"You would try flattery?"

"It is only the truth, Crisal."

Crisal dropped the sack of cakes on the road and kicked it. "I am my own person, Fyx. I dance at the ends of no one's string. Find yourself another pair of eyes." She turned toward Tieras, stomped past the old magician, not looking back.

Around the first bend in the road, Crisal stopped, found a suitable rock, and sat down. Salina must think me still a child, she thought, and Fyx thinks me a fool. And my father! His mock outrage that a fortune teller would want to become a magician. Unheard of! Disgrace! Bah! Crisal stood and kicked the nearest rock, sending it skittering across the road.

She turned to the darkening skies. If the old trickster needed a fortune teller, why did he not hire a master? Why this game about me being a magician's apprentice?

She pulled the feather from her robe and fondled it. This is what I want more than anything else on Momus: to be a magician. I don't want to sit in dark little rooms peering into futures and planning lives. To stand before the crowd, amazing them with my tricks—that is what I want. But is this, too, all sham?

She dropped the feather on the sand, reached her imaginary hands under its edge and heaved with all her might. The feather rocked, rocked again, then turned over. She sat, looking at the feather for a moment, then picked it up and got to her feet. The road was deserted in all directions. She looked to the blackening sky. Did I do that, Fyx? Are you still playing with me? Only wind mixed with a sprinkle of rain answered her.

Crisal looked down the road toward Tieras, and from there, to Tarzak, where she still might be apprenticed to some lesser magician. Perhaps she could follow the fortune teller's trade. Turning to look at the bend in the road toward Porse, she knew that on the other side

of the bend, the greatest magician on Momus waited for her to make up her mind. Rounding the bend, she saw Fyx standing where she left him, holding out the sack of provisions.

"We must hurry, Crisal. I fear we are in for a soaking."

Crisal walked up to the magician and took the sack without stopping. As she strode ahead she wondered if she would ever know what she would do before someone else did.

After reaching Porse that evening, they found all curtains closed to them. The uniform excuse was "Rogor would see." The two walked through the deserted-looking town until they came to the square. In the half-light of the stars peering through the parting clouds, they saw an upright figure in the center of the square, head and shoulders slumped over. As they came closer, they could see his feet did not touch the ground.

Fyx held Crisal back. "Stay here, child, while I investigate."

"What is it?"

"It is not for your eyes, Crisal."

"I thought my fortune teller's eyes were the reason for my company. I cannot see if I do not have information."

Fyx nodded. "Then come, but be prepared. He has been impaled."

Only close to the corpse did the dim light reveal the red and purple stripes of a Barker. Crisal froze as Fyx walked around to view the dead man's face.

"Is it the Barker who came to your house?"

"Yes, it is Yudo."

Crisal walked slowly around the grisly scarecrow and looked up into a face blessed with death. She heard a noise behind her and started. The old magician was storming around the square swinging his stick around and over his head. "Up, slime!" he called, his voice strong and bitter. "Off of your sleeping cushions, cowards! I, Fyx of the Tarzak magicians, will reduce this town to rubble unless my questions are answered satisfactorily! Up, slime, up!" Crisal watched as the ancient magician went from door to door pounding on the walls, shouting his oaths. No one dared enter the square.

Fyx stood silent for a full minute, then reached within his robe. "Very well, cowards of Porse; let your town be no more!" The magician waved his hand at the nearest house, which immediately burst into flame. Screams from within curdled Crisal's blood. From the next house a man in clown's orange ran to Fyx



and fell on his knees.

"Great Fyx, I beg you! Please spare us. We had no choice."

"This?" Fyx pointed at Yudo's motionless body. "You had no choice for this?"

"Great Fyx," the clown blubbered, "the Dark One was here!"

"Rogor? This is his doing?"

"Yes, Great Fyx. Look." The clown pointed to the wall at the far side of the square. In the flickering light of the burning building, Fyx could read:

WELCOME

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R O G O R
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R

Fyx walked to the wall, studied it, then returned to the center of the square, next to the corpse. "Clown, come here!"

The clown scurried to the magician's feet, hardly rising from his knees to get there. "Yes, Great Fyx?"

Fyx aimed his stick at the dead barker. "Who did this?"

"Great Fyx must understand, Rogor..."

"I must understand nothing!" Fyx delivered the clown a kick in the ribs sending him sprawling in the mud. "Who committed this outrage?"

"Rogor made us do it, Great Fyx. Those who didn't do the work were forced to watch."

"'Forced?' Did he have an army at your yellow backs?"

"He... he has great powers. We were afraid..."

"Afraid? And for this you denied the protection of your town to a traveler? Bah—not only that, you do another's murdering!"

"Great Fyx, the Dark One has fearful powers..."

"Bah! By the grey beard of Momus, I'll show you fearful powers!" Fyx kicked the clown again, waved his hand at the corpse and suddenly the square was filled with a blinding light. Crisal peeked through her fingers to see Yudo's body at the center of a roaring pyre of white and blue flames that reached up into the night sky. In seconds, the stake supporting the body burned through. "Clown, drive the curs that people this town into the square."

"Great Fyx, what if they will not come?"

Fyx raised his arms and screamed. "If they

do not come, I will roast them in their homes!"

The clown scurried off, and one by one, the people of Porse edged into the square, shielding their eyes from the light of the pyre, and from the sight of Fyx. The magician walked around the pyre, looking at the townspeople. By the time the flames had been reduced to glowing embers, Yudo was but ashes, and the people were assembled. Fyx bent over and lifted a handful of embers and held them over his head.

"You will take these ashes and mix them with the mud from this square. Hear me, scum of Porse?"

The people bowed their heads. "Yes, Great Fyx."

"Take the mixture and paint your houses with it. From this day hence, that shall be the color of Porse. Live with your shame and be faithful to it, for if I should ever pass this way again and find as much as a white fence post, Porse shall cease to exist." Fyx searched the crowd until he saw the clown. "You!"

The clown ran from the crowd and kneeled at Fyx's feet. "Yes, Great Fyx."

"Show me the ones who drove the stake into the barker and killed him."

"But, we had no . . ."

"Show me, or in the blink of an eye you shall be nothing but ashes!"

The clown bowed, got to his feet and walked around the square. As he passed by, six men separated from the crowd and approached Fyx with cowed heads. His task complete, the clown stood with the others. "I am one of them."

"Then, stand for your shame!" Fyx marked the forehead of each with his thumb leaving an ugly blue M. "Now, into the desert with you, and never let the sight of good men fall upon you." The seven men looked around the square at their neighbors, bowed their heads and walked from the square. As they reached the edge, the crowd parted, not daring even to look. Fyx tossed his handful of embers, now dead, on the remains of Yudo's pyre.

Crisal watched the old magician turn in her direction and walk toward her, his eyes burning with an emotion she could not read. Standing before her, he lifted the hand that had held the embers. It was dirty, but unburned. He placed it on her shoulder. "Come, child. This is no town for anyone to rest in, for they will have none of it from now until their shame is washed away."

Fyx took the street leading to the high road to Miira, the crowd parted, and Crisal followed, trying to decide in her own mind

whether what she felt for Fyx was fear or love.

Through the night, Fyx marched toward Miira town as if possessed. Crisal stumbled along behind, marveling at the old man's strength. Twice, rain and wind whipped them, causing the already muddy roads to grow slick as grease with dark, forbidding pools. Unmindful of the mud or the pools, Fyx strode through both as though he were on a hard, dusty street in Tarzak. As the second rain stopped, a dim grey dawn fought against the black clouds. Fyx stopped and turned to the light. "It is dawn."

"You don't miss a thing, Fyx." Crisal dragged herself next to the old man. He turned and looked at the girl, soaked and mud-caked as himself.

"You must be tired, child."

"Ah, Fyx, there is fortune teller's blood in your veins."

The magician raised an eyebrow. "I see you've spent the night honing your tongue. Do you wish to rest or not?"

"Of course." Crisal cocked her head at the drenched landscape. "But where?"

Fyx reached into his robe and handed Crisal a black wad of raw cobit dough. The lump was crusted hard and weighed heavily in the child's hand. "Pick a spot with neither trees, weeds, nor grass."

Crisal looked around, walked ahead to a sandy place on the east side of the road. "Here?"

Fyx nodded. "Listen carefully. When I tell you, crush the dough ball hard and throw it in the center of the clear spot." Crisal looked at the innocent lump in her hand. "You must be very quick; understand?"

"Yes."

"Then, now!"

Crisal crushed the ball and felt it warm her hand even before she threw it. Before it landed on the sand, it exploded into a blinding column of flame. Crisal turned to Fyx. "Yudo's pyre."

"Yes. With your right hand, feel inside the right sleeve of your robe. Do you feel a pocket?"

Crisal felt about and found an opening. "Yes."

The magician handed her five more of the black dough balls. "Put these in that pocket. You know how they can be used." Fyx nodded at the fire, almost gone out for lack of fuel. "It burns hot, but very fast. The sand will be dry, but only warm."

Crisal put the balls into her sleeve pocket. "Is this to be my first trick, Fyx?"

The magician laughed. "No, child. Your first trick will be learning how to sleep without rolling over on your sleeve!"

Crisal dragged herself onto the warm sand, stretched out and fell asleep, her right arm straight out from her body.

If Crisal deamed at all, it was of sleep. The clearing skies and rising sun warmed and dried her robe, and she wriggled happily as she fought back the wakefulness that gnawed at the edges of her sleep. She snuggled her face, cupped by her right hand against the sand, then remembered the dough balls. Sitting bolt upright, she saw that the loose sleeve of her robe had not been under her.

"Ah, child, you are awake."

Crisal turned to see a woman in singer's white and green sitting next to a tall blond man wearing the black and scarlet. The man nodded at Crisal. "Dorna invited me to warm my backside on your sand, little magician."

Crisal nodded back. The man was young and very strong-looking; the woman, as young, had black flowing hair and dark brown eyes. Crisal cursed her own freckles and muddy appearance next to the beautiful singer. "Have you seen my master?"

The young magician shrugged. The singer shook her head. "I suppose you should wait here for him." Dorna looked down at the magician's hand around her waist, then nodded her head toward Crisal. Shrugging, he removed his hand, and lay back on the sand, propping himself up with his elbows.

Crisal studied the young magician. "You are not from this planet, are you, magician?"

The man laughed. "No, child. My name is Ashly Allenby. I come from the parent planet."

"Yet, you wear the black and scarlet."

"Even I must eat. What are you called?"

"I am Crisal. I am apprenticed to a great magician."

"His name?" Allenby sat up.

Crisal looked at Dorna and read her eyes. "His name is of no consequence, Allenby." The girl waved her hand around indicating the sand she had dried.

Allenby raised his eyebrows and nodded. "The few movills I have already weep from loneliness. Would you observe a new trick of mine in exchange?"

Crisal shrugged. "If I can determine how you do it, I will still want payment."

Allenby chuckled and withdrew a deck of

cards from his robe. As he handed the deck to Crisal, he smoothed the sand before him with his hand. "Pick seven cards you can remember."

"I can remember any seven—or the entire deck, for that matter." Crisal thumbed off the first seven cards and handed them to Allenby.

"No, don't give them to me. Put them in a row, faces up, on the sand." Crisal put out the cards. "Do you have them memorized?"

"Of course."

Allenby spread his fingers above the cards and turned all seven over without touching them. "You're sure you have them memorized?"

"Yes."

"Then, turn over the three of clubs."

Crisal sighted the third card from her left, imagined the tiny hands of her mind under the edge of the card, and heaved. The card turned over, exposing the eight of diamonds. Allenby laughed at the expression on her face. "But the eight is here." She pointed at the card on her far right.

"You are sure?"

Crisal reached for the card and turned it over with her fingers; the six of spades. Dorna the singer nodded in admiration. "An excellent trick, Allenby." The young magician smiled his thanks and gathered up his cards. Crisal frowned.

"Can you tell me how I did that, Crisal?" Allenby tucked his cards away and stood.

Crisal broke her frown long enough to deliver a curt nod. "It is a good enough trick."

Allenby threw the hem of his robe over his shoulder and pointed south with mock drama. "Begads, with such lavish praise at my back, I must hasten to Tarzak and bedazzle the crowds."

Dorna stood. "Must you go, Ashly?"

Allenby bowed and took Dorna's hand, brushing it with his lips. "Aye, beautiful Dorna. I must make Tarzak. A cargo shuttle is said to be there. It is the first since I came to Momus, and I must catch it to send my news back to the Quadrant Secretary of State." He bowed toward Crisal, then hefted his sack and stepped onto the road heading south. Dorna and Crisal both watched until long after he was out of sight.

The girl turned toward the singer. "Dorna?"

"Yes, child?"

"I read something in your eyes, but I cannot fathom what I saw in them. Where is my master?"

The beautiful Dorna smiled, covered her

face with her robe, then lowered it. Fyx's toothless smile grinned at the girl.

"Fyx, by Momus' boiled behind—it is you?"

The old man cackled. "Turn your back, child."

"What will you do then; turn yourself into a lizard, or me into a boy?"

"Turn around. I must reverse my robe."

Crisal turned. "All this playacting, Fyx; what did it accomplish?"

"A young magician would guard his tongue more closely with the Great Fyx than with lovely Dorna. You may turn around now."

Crisal turned and saw Fyx before her in his black and scarlet. "Was that not magic, too, Fyx? Where did your wrinkles go?"

"Make a frown, Crisal, and feel your forehead."

Crisal did as she was told. "So?"

"You are young, yet you can make wrinkles; I am old, and can make my skin smooth, although it takes much effort."

"Very well, Fyx, but explain the beautiful Dorna's teeth. You haven't one in your entire head."

"Neither did Dorna."

Crisal folded her arms. "She did too!"

"Think, Crisal. Those wide sensuous lips smiled, but never parted unless a hand or sleeve was before them."

The girl frowned. "I remember . . . no, I feel I remember. You are right; I saw no teeth." Crisal shook her head. "What had the magician to say that was of value?"

"Here, eat." Fyx reached into their sack and produced two soggy cobit cakes. "Allenby comes from as far north as Dirak on the other side of the Snake Mountains. He also passed through Miira on his way to Tarzak. Both towns are black with despair. Rogor is leaving his mark."

Crisal swallowed a piece of cobit, then dropped the remainder into the sack. "Fyx, can we go around Miira?"

"You are thinking of last night in Porse."

Crisal nodded. "These people do not know what faces them; we do not know. I want no more horrors."

Fyx finished his cake and studied the girl. "You think my actions harsh?"

Crisal shrugged. "I understand why they acted as they did."

Fyx nodded. "Imagine this, Crisal: you have a knife in your hand held at Salina, your mother's, throat; I am holding you with a knife at your throat. I tell you that if you do not kill Salina, I will kill you. What would you do?"

Crisal bowed her head, walked to the edge of the dry sand, then walked back. "I would like to think I would die. Is that what you want to hear?"

"That was Porse's choice, Crisal, and they failed."

The girl looked into the old man's eyes. "Will we pass through Miira?"

Fyx nodded. "We must. That is where we pick up our provisions and transportation across the mountains." The old man picked up the sack and handed it to the girl. "We must be off if we are to get there before nightfall."

As they climbed the steepening foothills into Miira, the setting sun picked out with red, orange, and yellow the untended fields, half-cut and dressed timber logs and deserted streets. The houses, now made of wood, stood empty. Fyx pounded on several doors, but all those he knew in the town were gone. Walking further into the town, they entered the square. Crisal gripped Fyx's arm and pointed at the center of the square.

"Look, Fyx, another murder!"

The old magician followed the direction of Crisal's finger and studied what he saw. In the back of a two-wheeled pull cart, a huge man garbed in the freak's green and yellow was sprawled on a few sacks, his massive arms and legs hanging over the sides and end of the cart. "Come, Crisal. He only sleeps."

As they approached the cart, the huge man opened one eye, then nodded. "You are the Great Fyx."

Fyx nodded. "And you?"

Quick and graceful for his size, the man sat up, then leaped from the cart to the ground. He bowed, aiming his bald pate in Fyx's direction. "Great Fyx, I am Zuma, strongman of the Dirak freaks."

"Dirak?"

"From the other side of the Snake Mountains, Great Fyx."

The old magician nodded, then passed his hand around the square. "Where are they?"

Zuma chuckled, making a rumble that seemed, to Crisal, to vibrate the ground. "The news of your judgment in Porse arrived hours ago. The good citizens of Miira have taken to the hills."

"And you?"

"Me?"

"How do we find you snoozing in the square amidst this rush to return to nature?"

"Hah!" Zuma laughed and slapped Crisal's shoulder, sending her sprawling. "I am Zuma. No more needs to be said."

Crisal picked herself up and scowled at the strongman. "He is here for a reason, Fyx."

Zuma nodded. "That scrap of an apprentice speaks the truth. The town of Dirak sent me to bring you across the mountains."

Fyx rubbed his chin. "Dirak knew, then, that Miira would take this vacation?"

Zuma spat on the ground. "Rogor's arm is felt even on this side of the mountains. Dirak takes no chance that you might be late for lack of transportation."

"You do not fear the Dark One, then?"

"Fear him? Hah!" Zuma flexed his mighty arms, stooped and wrapped them around the wooden cart. Standing, he lifted the cart over his head. "Zuma fears no one." The strongman lowered the cart to the ground as gently as a feather. Turning, he frowned at Fyx. "If I could find the sorcerer, there would be little need for you, magician. But..." The huge man shrugged.

Crisal's eyes narrowed as she tried to read the strongman's eyes. "Zuma, my master is hired by the town of Ikona to rid them of Rogor. You are from Dirak."

Zuma nodded. "All four towns in the Emerald Valley, Dirak, Ikona, Ris, and even the fishing village of Anoki, have contributed. Ikona has gotten the worst of it, and they made the contract." Fyx looked at the girl, his eyebrows raised. Crisal only shrugged. "Shall we go then?" He tossed Zuma a purse.

Fyx and Crisal climbed into the cart and settled themselves among the boxes and sacks. Zuma stooped under the pull handle at the front of the cart, stood and gripped it with his powerful hands. As they clattered through Miira, Crisal studied the back of Zuma's head. Turning to the old magician, she tugged his sleeve. "Fyx..."

Fyx touched a finger against her lips and shook his head. "Try and sleep."

"Sleep?" Crisal threw up her hands at the absurdity.

Fyx looked into her eyes. "Sleep." Crisal fought against it, but her mind clouded, then grew dark.

Crisal looked down from a great height and saw a wooden handcart being pulled by a powerful man. In the back of the cart were two figures dressed in black and scarlet. The cart left houses behind and made its way up a gentle incline. At times, a turn in the road or an overhanging tree would obscure the travelers, but as the cart pulled onto a high mesa and worked its way around the shore of a small

lake, she felt herself drawn to the vehicle. She swooped down, coming up behind and just above the cart. In the cart she saw herself, asleep, her head cradled on Fyx's lap.

Fyx! She called out, but had no voice. Fyx, what is this?

See ahead, child, the man pulling the cart?

Fyx, I am frightened.

Do you see him?

Yes, yes, but Fyx... Crisal saw the cart turn from the lakeshore to follow a steep road into the mountains.

Crisal, you will enter Zuma's mind and tell me what you see.

Crisal looked at her own sleeping face, then up into Fyx's. *I can't, Fyx. What if he is Rogor?*

You suspected something, then?

I could not read his eyes.

Perhaps what you read was out of your experience. Have you ever read murder?

No.

Then, you would not recognize it.

Fyx, if it is Rogor, will he know I am there?

Crisal saw the old magician look down and stroke the face of the sleeping child, pushing a tangled lock of red hair away from her eyes. *If it is Rogor, he will know, but I will protect you. Do you believe this?*

Yes, Fyx. What must I do?

Look at Zuma's head. Do you see the aura?

Crisal turned and saw a pale glow rippling above the strongman's skin all over his body. *Yes, I see it.*

When I tell you, go to it and blend with it. But, remember, child, whatever happens to you, do not try to speak to me. Do not cry out, and neither fight what you find there nor try to change it. Do you understand?

Yes, Fyx.

Then, go.

Crisal saw the road's incline steepen, and as she touched, then wrapped herself around Zuma's aura, the cart turned, exposing a cliff falling away to the left. The aura was foreign, but she felt herself change a particle at a time until a harmony between herself and the aura was achieved.

Zuma looked over the edge of the cliff and chuckled. No one would ever find the old man and the child down there, he thought. Rogor will line my purse with coppers instead of plague for my crops. The strongman shook off a twinge of guilt. No one can fight Rogor's magic. I must do as I am told.

Seeing the sharp turn in the road ahead with a flat place carved into the wall opposite the

cliff, Zuma turned back toward the old magician. "We will stop here and rest." He pulled the cart onto the flat and lowered the handle. Stepping out from under the handle, Zuma began picking up dead twigs and sticks along the road. "I will have hot food for us in a moment."

Fyx nodded and shook the sleeping child's shoulder. Crisal started awake, her eyes wild with fear. Fyx touched her lips and stroked her face. "Come, child. While Zuma prepares our food, there is something I would show you. This part of the Snake Mountain cliff is the highest. It is very beautiful, even in starlight."

Trembling, Crisal stepped down from the cart, followed by Fyx. The old magician took her hand and walked to the very edge of the cliff. "Fyx . . ."

"Hush, child. Just look down and listen."

Crisal looked down, but could not see the bottom of the cliff in the dark. Wind whistled and echoed from the walls, and very far away, she could hear water flowing. Fyx stooped over, picked up a rock and moved so close to the cliff's edge that their toes hung over. Holding Crisal tightly about her shoulders with his right arm, he tossed the rock into the chasm with his left. Crisal listened, but heard nothing but the wind and the water far away. "Fyx, should we stand so close . . ."

"Observe nature's beauty, child, and listen."

Crisal listened and heard the crackle of the fire Zuma had started. She also heard soft footsteps padding up behind them. She tried to pull back from the edge of the cliff, but the old man's grip held her tight. The footsteps came closer, then began running. Crisal turned her head, and three full strides to her right, Zuma ran to the edge of the cliff, arms outstretched, and sailed over, plummeting into the darkness below, followed by a trail of screamed question marks.

Crisal looked up at Fyx. "Why . . .?"

"That's where he saw us, child. Poor fellow must have an eye problem." Fyx cackled and turned back to the fire. "Come, Crisal. Zuma was kind enough to build a fire, but I'm afraid we'll have to prepare our own food. Pity."

Crisal looked into the darkness hiding the remains of the strongman, then turned to watch the old magician, a smile on his face, setting up rocks around the fire upon which he would cook their cakes. As she walked slowly to the fire, she thought again about Bianice's comment about a vapor being caught between a sledge and an anvil.

§ § §

The next morning, having determined that neither Fyx's magic nor their combined strength could move the heavy cart, while Fyx prepared their morning meal, Crisal searched among the sacks and boxes hoping to find enough provisions to support them to Dirak. "There is more than enough, Fyx, if we can carry it all; even blankets for the mountain nights." Crisal continued moving the contents of the cart around, examining the contents of each sack and box.

"Child, if you've found enough food, leave the cart alone so we can eat and be off." Fyx saw that he was being ignored, shrugged and sat by the dying fire. As he bit into a cobit cake spread with sapjam, Crisal stood in the cart holding a small package in her hands. She climbed down from the cart and walked to the fire.

"See this, Fyx?" She held the package out.

The magician put down his cake, took the package and turned it over. It was white with rounded corners, in two halves held together with a clear, seamless cover. It had no markings. "Do your fortune teller's eyes tell you what it is?"

Crisal shook her head. "I saw in Zuma's thoughts he was bringing something for Rogor. Dare we open it?"

Fyx held the package to his ear, shook it and shrugged. With his fingernail, he pried up an end of the clear cover, stuck his finger beneath it and made it stretch until the opening was large enough to remove the cover. With the cover removed, Fyx placed the package on his lap and lifted off the top half. Firmly held in place by the moulded bottom half was a mechanism, blue-black with a handle extending from a curved plate. At the top of the plate were numerous black, red and orange cubes from which hair-thin wires came. Toward the front of the plate, the wires gathered into a cable and terminated at a threaded cylinder that hung loose at the end of the cable. The front of the handle was shaped into five rings, the one closest to the plate larger than the others and containing a metal lever that extended back into the handle. The back edge of the handle had two rings together of the same size. Fyx looked up at Crisal.

"Well?"

"What is it, Fyx?"

The magician lifted the object from the moulded half and turned it over in his hands. Holding the curved plate upright, he clasped his hand around the handle, putting his thumb through the top rear hole and his fingers

through the top front four. He cocked his head at Crisal. "Stand out of the way."

Crisal moved aside while Fyx aimed the object at the chasm wall opposite their perch. He pulled the metal lever back with his forefinger; nothing happened. Fyx lowered the thing to his lap and shrugged. "I thought it might be a gun of some design, but it does nothing."

Crisal pointed. "Look, Fyx." The girl's finger tapped the extra ring beneath Fyx's little finger, and again the extra ring beneath his thumb. "If it's a handle, it wasn't meant for hands like ours."

The magician nodded, then handed the object to Crisal. "What do your fortune teller's eyes make of our future now?"

Crisal took the object and sat on the sand next to the fire. She looked at the handle, turned it over and shook her head. "Fyx, I haven't assembled enough information to make any sense of the present, much less talk about the future." She took the mouldings and cover and reassembled the package, placing it in her sack.

"It doesn't do anything, child; why drag the extra weight?"

Crisal stuffed some cake in her mouth and talked around it. "Allenby, that young magician from Earth, he said he was trying to meet a cargo shuttle. I think Zuma picked this package up there for Rogor. It is something Rogor wants, and now we've got it."

"But, we don't know what it does, nor where it comes from."

Crisal squinted her eyes, looked at her lap, then at Fyx. "Allenby said he had news to send to Earth—no, to the Quadrant Secretary of State. What news?"

Fyx shrugged and reached for another cake. "Some prattle about sending a diplomatic mission to Momus. Also, that his news had attracted the newstellers and that the law they require should be made by the time whoever it is shows up."

Crisal took the remainder of her cobit cake and threw it at the old magician's head. "Old fake!"

Fyx stood, his eyes narrowing in anger. "Brat. Have you lost your mind? I could turn you into ashes in the blink of an eye."

The girl stuck out her tongue and made a rude noise. "I see where you cannot, Fyx. Now, tell me the whole truth. I cannot see the things I have to see without it."

The old magician pursed his lips, nodded and resumed his seat by the fire. "Allenby is an official of the Ninth Quadrant. He has come to

Momus to arrange for military protection for our planet."

"Protection? From whom?"

Fyx shrugged. "The Ninth Quadrant suspects an invasion of Momus by the Tenth Quadrant Federation."

Crisal nodded. "And this law; what is that?"

"Momus must ask for the protection, otherwise it would violate laws that govern all the quadrants."

Crisal felt the outline of the package in her sack, then picked up another cobit cake, eating it slowly. "Fyx, what do you know of the Tenth Quadrant worlds?"

"As much as I know about the worlds of the Ninth, child; next to nothing." Fyx stood and hefted his sack. "Can you continue your cogitations while we walk? The morning is aging rapidly."

Crisal nodded, picked up her sack and walked to the cart. "Will your magic keep you warm, or do you want a blanket?"

Fyx snorted, turned his back and began climbing the steep road. Crisal picked up two blankets, tucked them under her arm, threw her sack over her shoulder and followed.

Three mornings later, Fyx and Crisal stood on the north foothills of the Snake Mountains looking out over the Emerald Valley. Toward the sun, green fields dotted with brown extended to the horizon, leaving space for only a lake, and above the lake, a small village. Fyx pointed his stick at the village. "That is Ikona."

"The two towns before us?"

"The first is Dirak, and the second at the base of the mountain is called Ris."

Crisal looked to her left to see more green fields, dotted with brown, extending until they met a wide expanse of water. She pointed to a small settlement at the edge of the water. "Anoki?"

Fyx nodded. "The brown you see in the fields must be the dying crops."

Crisal studied them, but there seemed to be no pattern, save that the fields closest to the mountain on the other side of the valley had no brown. "What is the mountain opposite us called?"

"Split Mountain. You will see why when we get to Ikona. A great movement in the crust of Momus caused a crooked rent in the mountain that extends deep into its center."

Crisal pointed at the town straddling the road before them. "Dirak, at least, has a welcome planned for us."

Fyx rubbed his chin. "Keep alert; Rogor can

plan welcomes, too." He nodded his head toward the three men who stood at the entrance to the town gate.

The old magician hefted his sack and stepped off, working his way down the road to Dirak. Crisal followed a few paces behind, studying the men at the gate. All three wore the black and tan short robes of roustabouts and stood motionless, waiting. When she could see their eyes, Crisal moved up beside Fyx. "I read mayhem in their eyes, Fyx."

The magician nodded. As they approached the three, Crisal saw Fyx's left hand disappear into its sleeve and return again as a fist. The old man put a smile on his face and nodded at the three toughs. "A pleasant morning, friends."

The roustabout in the middle glanced at his companions, then walked toward the two travelers. "You are the Great Fyx?" The man offered nothing for the information.

"Yes, And your name, friend?"

The man looked up the road into the Snake Mountains, then back at the magician. "I am Jagar. Where is Zuma?"

Fyx shrugged. "The strongman took leave of his senses and leaped from a cliff to his death. We could not stop him."

Jagar studied Fyx, then looked at Crisal. "Is this true?"

Crisal looked at Jagar and turned up her nose. "You doubt the word of my master?"

Striking swiftly, Jagar grabbed the front of Fyx's robe. "The cart, old man; what have you..." Fyx passed his left hand before Jagar's face, and the roustabout dropped to the ground, twitching.

Fyx arranged his robe and stepped over the body toward the two remaining roustabouts. "Rude fellow." Seeing their companion twitching in the dust, the two turned and fled through the town gate and disappeared down an alley. The magician turned around and knelt next to Jagar. "Crisal, come here." The girl stood across the body and looked into Jagar's face. The man's eyes rolled with terror and spittle dribbled from the corners of his mouth. "I will ask him some questions, child. Tell me what you see."

"Yes, Fyx."

The magician reached into his robe and withdrew a tiny vial filled with a colorless fluid. Opening it, he forced Jagar's teeth open and let three drops of the fluid fall into the man's mouth. In a few seconds, Jagar lay quiet. "Jagar. You hear me?" Fyx waited a moment, then slapped the man's face hard enough to

make Crisal wince. "Jagar!"

"Spare me, Great Fyx." The man barely spoke above a whisper.

"Spare you? Jagar, I will ask you questions and you will answer me truthfully. Then, perhaps we may talk of sparing your miserable life."

"I can't... talk to you of Rogor, Great Fyx. This is what you would ask?"

"It is. What will Rogor do if you talk?"

"Oh, Great Fyx, he will kill me!"

Fyx cackled. "Hear me, Jagar: you will tell me all I wish to know, or else I shall visit such horrors upon you that you will beg me for that same death."

"Ask, then, Great Fyx."

"The gadget in the cart Zuma was to bring, what is it?"

"I do not know." Fyx looked at Crisal and the girl nodded back.

"Was it for Rogor?"

"Yes. We were told to wait here for it."

"What were you to do with it?"

"It was to be taken to the fountain in Ikona."

"And?"

"That's all, Great Fyx. I swear it."

Crisal knelt next to Jagar. "He does not lie. Ask him if he's ever seen Rogor."

Fyx poked Jagar in the arm. "Well?"

"No. No one has ever seen the Dark One."

Crisal turned Jagar's face toward her with her hand and looked deep into his eyes. "Jagar, where are the people of Dirak?"

"Child, they are in Ris. All of the towns of the Emerald Valley are in Ris."

"Why?"

"The people assemble to form an army and declare Rogor King of Momus."

Fyx looked into the child's face. "Do you see something?"

Crisal nodded. "Yes. I feel I have the parts to an answer. I must still fit them together. We must leave the road and find a quiet place."

As Fyx led the way through the fields toward Ikona, Crisal stopped to examine both green and brown stalks of grain, healthy and rotting melon patches. Reaching some trees near the lake below Ikona, Crisal withdrew her clear glass marble and fell to her knees. Hearing her, Fyx turned and sat next to her. She held the ball in the sun, catching its rays, and used it to focus her mind. Pieces of the puzzle fit together, but something still lay out of her grasp. She dropped the marble to her lap and shook her head. "It is not enough."

"Can you at least see a question?"

Crisal smoothed the sand in front of her

knees and drew Rogor's cross with her finger.

```
      R
      O
R  O  G  O  R
      O
      R
```

"Fyx, I must know the meaning of this."

The old magician shook his head. "It is as I told you, Crisal. It means nothing."

"Tell me what you can, Fyx. It is the part I need."

Fyx rubbed his chin. "It could be the hidden cross of a magic square."

"Magic square?"

Fyx shook his head. "There is no magic to them. They were believed to cure illnesses and drive away evil spirits long ago. Some magicians take names that can form such a cross."

"Show me a magic square."

Fyx smoothed the sand next to Rogor's cross. "This is a very old one. It is formed by two words, sator and opera. The words must fit frontwards, backwards and up and down. Like this." The old magician quickly drew the words and word arrangements with his finger.

```
S  A  T  O  R
A  R  E  P  O
T  E       E  T
O  P  E  R  A
R  O  T  A  S
```

"Now, all we do is add an 'N' in the middle, and the word 'tenet' becomes the hidden cross in this magic square." Fyx added the 'N' and smoothed out the rest of the letters.

```
      T
      E
T  E  N  E  T
      E
      T
```

"No magic in it; just a word game."

Crisal studied the word, drew in again the letters Fyx had erased, studied it some more, then erased the entire square. Erasing Rogor's cross, Crisal looked again at her marble.

Fyx raised his eyebrows as Crisal began making marks in the smooth sand. "Let us use the name of Dirak town the same as 'sator' in the tenet square."

```
D  I  R  A  K
I           A
R           R
A           I
K  A  R  I  D
```

"See?"

Fyx shrugged. "What of the rest?"

Crisal's finger flew at the sand. "The towns of Ikona and Anoki we use the same as 'arepo' and 'opera' in the tenet square... add a 'G' and there you are."

```
D  I  R  A  K
I  K  O  N  A
R  O  G  O  R
A  N  O  K  I
K  A  R  I  D
```

Fyx nodded. "And there is Rogor's hidden cross. But, what use is this to us?"

"Fyx, if this were a map and Dirak sat on the bottom 'D' of the square," Crisal poked it with her finger, "and if Ikona were here," she stabbed the 'I' above the bottom 'D', "and if the fishing village of Anoki were here," she poked the 'A' in the bottom rank of letters, "where would the extra letter fall?"

Fyx stood and looked at the square, then squatted next to it and drew in a few landmarks. "The 'G' falls at the end of the cleft in the center of Split Mountain." Fyx stood and pointed across Ikona toward the peak. "Now you can see where the cleft begins."

Crisal stood and observed the crooked pass that led deep into the mountain, its walls hanging with bushy vines. The mountain itself was hidden beneath a heavy growth of trees except for its highest point, which grew only scrub trees and brush. "This is your invitation from Rogor," Crisal pointed at the 'G' in Rogor's cross. "We will find his lair at the end of the cleft. It is a trap."

Fyx nodded. "Rogor has gone to great pains to kill me, and yet he points the way for me to destroy him."

"There is more, Fyx. This thing in my sack that I got from Zuma's cart; it is a weapon, or a part of a weapon. It is what killed the farmers' crops. Look." Crisal pulled some half-brown, half-green stalks from her robe. "The part below is healthy, but look at the brown part. It looks as though it had been dipped in boiling water. Can your powders and other tricks protect you against such a thing?"

"Fyx, what would happen if Rogor became king of Momus and then asked the Tenth Quadrant Federation for military protection

against the Ninth Quadrant?"

Fyx shrugged, then looked down at the square. "As I understand it, the Ninth would have no choice but to let Momus be occupied, such as their laws are." He cackled. "But, child, Momus with a king? Perhaps Rogor can bully this small valley, but how could he become king of Momus? The ruler of Emerald Valley can't speak for the planet."

"Fyx, you saw the fear on the other side of the Snake Mountain, in Miira and Porse."

"And, child, I set them straight in Porse. Have no doubt about it. We can do the same everywhere south of the Snake Mountains. Neither of us will ever see a king in Tarzak."

"But, when you are dead, Fyx, what will there be to stop King Rogor, his terrible weapons and his army of terror-driven thugs?"

"Dead?" The old magician pounded his chest. "I am far from dead, child."

"That is an obstacle Rogor and the Tenth Quadrant would like to remove; that's why Rogor offered the twenty thousand movills."

"Rogor? My contract is with him?" Fyx shook his head and frowned. "My brother was not a clever person, Crisal. Where does this devilish thinking come from? What has he discovered?"

Crisal spread out their blankets and stretched out on one of them. "His thinking comes from the same place that gives him his weapons, Fyx—another world." She patted the blanket next to hers. "Rest. We will need our wits about us tonight."

"We?" Fyx lowered himself to his blanket and put his stick aside. "Child, I promised Salina to turn you back once you had seen the answers to my questions. There is nothing left now but to pit my tricks against Rogor's."

"I told you, Rogor has powerful weapons; not tricks."

"Promise me you will not enter the mountain's cleft."

"But, you will . . ."

"It is my promise to Salina, child! Give me your promise."

"Very well." Crisal rolled over and turned her back to the magician. "I promise to stay clear of the mountain's cleft."

Crisal awakened to a black, starless night. Rolling over, she felt for the magician, but found only his long cold blanket. Even straining her eyes, she could see little more than a dim outline of Split Mountain against the night sky. Fyx was somewhere within that great shadow preparing to do battle—or dead.

Crisal stood and mulled over the stupid

promise Fyx had made her give. "What chance have you, old man, against weapons that can roast entire fields?" She stepped off to begin pacing, but stumbled over her sack. Regaining her balance, she pulled back a foot intending to deliver the sack a swift one. Hesitating, she squatted down, opened the sack and took out the white package. The roustabout at the gate to Dirak said he was to deliver it to the fountain in Ikona.

"Yes!" Crisal remembered Yudo, the barker, saying that his letter for Fyx had appeared at the fountain in Ikona. The girl held the package under her arm and stood, her back to the lake, facing the tiny farming village. From there she looked to the peak of Split Mountain. Reaching into her robe, she wrapped her hand around her glass marble. "The brown spots—there are none at the base of the mountain. Up there, on the peak, must be the weapon." Her feet carried her toward the town with its fountain. "And, if Rogor's friends have machines that can kill entire fields; moving a letter, a package," she smiled, "or a small child should be no great task."

Crisal stood before the unremarkable fountain in Ikona's tiny square. The streets and houses were deserted, and she examined the structure, unafraid of discovery. The fountain itself was a simple column of mortar and stone with a weak spout of water rising from its center. The water dribbled down into a trough that surrounded the column, then drained off into a hole in the flatstone and mortar walkway that covered the center of the square. Looking behind her, Crisal could see that hers were the only footprints in the square, at least since the last rain. The path she had taken from the lake to the village was well traveled.

"Why do they go to the lake for water, unless there is danger here in the square?" Crisal looked over the top of the fountain to see the peak of Split Mountain. Without stepping on the flatstones, she walked part way around the fountain, examining the walkway. Because of the dark, she could tell no difference, but on the side facing the mountain she could make out a flatstone larger than the others. It seemed to shine, as if it had been scrubbed with sand many times. Picking up a handful of dust from the square, she threw it up, making a cloud between the stone and the mountain. Caught in the air, the cloud passed and settled to the ground undisturbed.

Crisal looked around the square until she found a rock the size of her fist. Taking it, she



walked to the fountain and stepped gingerly on the flatstone walkway. When nothing happened, she let out her breath and slowly approached the large flatstone facing Split Mountain. Squatting next to it, she rolled the fist-sized stone into the center of its shiny surface. The stone sat motionless for a moment, then disappeared, leaving a sharp smell in the air.

Clenching her teeth, Crisal gripped the white package in both hands and jumped into the center of the stone. As she looked at the peak of Split Mountain, she felt tears running down her cheeks. She closed her eyes. "I am *not* afraid!"

"I'm pleased to hear that." Opening her eyes, before her stood a grinning figure in black and scarlet. He was old, stooped and had a blue M marked on his wrinkled forehead.

"Rogor!" Crisal dropped the package and reached into her sleeve for Fyx's fireballs. Her movements slowed to less than a crawl as the magician walked up to her and calmly removed the balls from her sleeve.

"You startled me, child. I thought Fyx had shrunk." Rogor took the fireballs and tucked them away in his own sleeve pocket. "Nasty little things."

The magician lifted Crisal and moved her from the platform where she had been standing. Carefully, Rogor examined every pocket in the girl's robe, then tied her hands at her back with a wire pulled from his waist. Having bound her securely, he pushed her to the ground and snapped his fingers. Crisal felt her muscles regain their normal speed, then she sobbed as Rogor went to the platform and picked up the package. He opened it and grinned as he pulled out the blue-black handle. "Ah, child, I should pay you. I have waited a long time for this."

Rogor walked across the platform and stepped down to the smooth hard surface beneath. Crisal noticed for the first time that the entire surface around her was smooth and hard, save for holes from which small trees grew. The magician stopped at a long, slender cylinder mounted on a metal-wheeled cart. He took a small threaded cylinder dangling from an opening on the bottom of the object and connected it to the handle. This completed, Rogor pushed the handle up into the larger cylinder and snapped it into place. "You have brought me the kingdom of Momus." He turned his head in Crisal's direction. "Know what this is?" "No." She tried to move, but she felt the wire cut her wrists.

Rogor laughed. "Watch!" The magician

worked controls at the base of the machine that Crisal couldn't see. The light from the controls cast a greenish glow on Rogor's face. He stepped back from the machine. With a low hum, the wheels turned slightly and the long cylinder tipped down. The hum grew louder for a moment, then ceased.

"That is how you kill the crops, Rogor."

He nodded. "Another unbeliever's crops have died. But, with this new trigger," he walked to the machine and aimed it into the air, "I have the very strength of Momus in my hands." A blinding white beam split the air and parted the clouds above them. Rogor stopped the beam and pushed the machine to the opposite side of the smooth area. "I can even melt mountains if I choose." Crisal pushed herself to her knees and got to her feet. Looking in the direction where Rogor aimed, she saw the great cleft in the mountain.

"No!"

Rogor looked at her. "Eh? Are you so fond of my mountain you could not bear to see me put a hole in it?" He cackled. "Or is there a little old man down in the cleft who might get hurt?" Rogor walked over to Crisal, held her chin with an iron grip and forced her to look into his face. "Is Fyx down there?"

Crisal tried to spit at Rogor, but her mouth was too dry. Laughing, the magician pushed her to the ground again. "No, child, this cannon would do the trick, but then Fyx would never know." Leaving the cannon, Rogor walked over to some bushes and pushed them aside, exposing another wheeled contraption, this one a black cube. From its top, several large prisms were supported by metal arms. He pushed the machine to the edge of the cleft and began working the controls. "This is what took you from the fountain in Ikona, child. With it I can see anything within a two day's walk, and can bring it to my mountaintop if I choose."

Rogor turned the controls, all the time watching a screen. He frowned as he searched, then smiled. "Much of the path at the bottom of the cleft cannot be seen because of the turns and twists of the walls, but from here I can see the power station at the end of the cleft. Sooner or later . . . yes, that's him. Fyx."

Rogor pushed more controls, then turned to the platform, drawing a pistol from beneath his robe. In the blink of an eye, the back of a black and scarlet robed figure holding a stick appeared on the platform. "Fyx. It is you, isn't it?"

"Rogor?"

"Just so you know, Fyx." Rogor fired the pistol, sending a pencil-thin streak of light through the figure on the platform. The stick fell and the robe collapsed. Rogor took a step toward it, then cursed, seeing the robe flat and empty. Quickly he leveled the pistol on Crisal. "Fyx, I have the little brat in my sights. Come out where I can see you, or I will cut her in two. Come out, and if I even sense your thoughts reaching toward mine, I will kill her!" Rogor looked around to his right, then his left. "Hear me, Fyx!"

"I hear you, Rogor." To Rogor's left, Fyx moved from behind some bushes, naked and looking small and helpless.

Rogor smiled, then laughed, turning the pistol on his brother. "I feel you trying to work my thoughts, Fyx, but I am stronger."

Crisal watched as Rogor straightened his right arm, aiming the pistol dead center. She closed her eyes and tiny hands searched Rogor's sleeve. Finding what they searched for, they wrapped themselves around a blackened dough ball and squeezed. Before she floated into black nothingness, she felt hot flame wash her face.

Crisal opened her eyes and looked up into a face lit with a red light. The face looked over her at the source of the light. "Fyx, it is you." The magician looked down and smiled a toothless grin. Crisal realized the old man was holding her in his arms. She threw her arms around Fyx's neck and held him tightly. "Fyx, it is you."

"Child," Fyx gasped, "you may succeed where Rogor failed. Let me breathe!"

Crisal relaxed her hold, but kept her head against Fyx's chest. "I killed him, didn't I?"

"You had no choice, Crisal."

"He was your brother."

"I tell you, you had no choice." Crisal looked into the old magician's eyes and read nothing but love. She turned toward the light and saw the sides of the cleft burning. Below, molten rock filled the cleft from side to side. "Let me down, Fyx." Once on her feet, and steady, Crisal looked away from the cleft. The smooth, hard surface was empty. "Where are the machines and the platforms?"

She looked at the magician, and he nodded toward the river of molten rock. "Down there."

"Fyx, they could have made you the greatest magician on Momus!"

The old man raised his eyebrows and turned toward the girl. "Child, I am the greatest magician on Momus."

Crisal nodded. "But, what of the Quadrant laws? Rogor didn't build these machines." She pointed at the red, flowing rock. "How did that happen?"

"I turned Rogor's cannon on the power station below. You are right; these are not Rogor's works."

"But, without the machines, how can we prove that Rogor had help from off-planet?"

"We can't. Hence, no act of war can be proven. No one from the Tenth Quadrant will tell of what was attempted here, and neither will we."

"But, if the law . . ."

"Child, what do your fortune teller's eyes show you if the Ninth Quadrant knew about this?"

Crisal frowned. "They would send their own force to counter the forces of the Tenth . . . and they would settle their differences here, on Momus."

The magician nodded. "Great powers usually find someone else's back yard in which to wage their wars. We have spared Momus that."

"What of Rogor's army forming in Ris?"

Fyx turned from the cleft and walked to the mountainside. Crisal followed behind as they began the long climb. Fyx talked over his shoulder as he felt his way down. "They will get tired of waiting for King Rogor. In a day of two they will drift back to their towns. Some will still talk in fear of Rogor, but next spring the crops will come up again. In a few years, nothing will remain of Rogor except children who will try to scare each other with tales of the ghost of Split Mountain."

Crisal followed until she stumbled, barking her shins on a sharp rock. "Fyx, wait. Let me rest."

The old man turned and stood next to her. "Here is a grassy spot, Crisal. We can rest here until morning."

The girl moved to the place and sat down, rubbing her legs. The magician lowered him-

self next to her and put his stick on the ground. Lifting up a hip, he plucked a rock from beneath it and tossed it down the mountain. Crisal bit her lip and turned to the old man. "Fyx, I know Salina agreed to let me apprentice to you at your request, but what happens now? Rogor is defeated. Am I needed anymore?"

Fyx let his head fall slowly to the ground and looked at the cloudy sky. "Momus has drawn the interest of powerful forces. I shall return to Tarzak and do what I can. Our troubles do not end here."

"But what of me?"

"You shall rest. Go to sleep."

Crisal felt her mind cloud. "Fyx, I don't like it when you make me sleep. . . ." She saw herself in a black mist, floating free. All around her was black save a wisp of white floating to her left. *Fyx?*

Yes, child.

The black mist parted and Crisal saw stars above and a fluffy blanket of clouds beneath. The wisp of white turned and streaked toward the east. Crisal turned and followed. *Fyx! Fyx, what is this?*

We have done little but work magic, child. Now, I would show you some play!

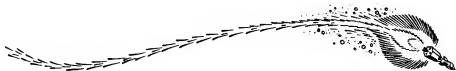
Where do we fly?

We meet the sun. Hurry, we can go fast—as fast as we wish.

Crisal darted away from the clouds toward the stars, laughed, then dipped into the black mist and up again at Fyx. The magician dodged and cackled. *Fyx, my question. Will I still be your apprentice?* Her companion mist flew a circle around her, then darted toward the yellowing sky ahead. *Well, Fyx?*

Yes, you shall remain my apprentice. She hesitated, then streaked far ahead of the magician. Someday, Crisal, you shall be the greatest magician of us all.

The sun burst upon Crisal's sight, and she outshone it.



UNDER THE RAINBOW

Science Fiction in Hollywood

by Craig Miller

Back around the beginning of April, I received a phone call from George Scithers, the editor of this magazine. He asked me if I'd like to write a regular column for the new magazine on science fiction and movies and television and Hollywood from an Insider's Viewpoint.

I'm not *really* an insider, but I guess I'm close enough. I work in and around the motion-picture/television industry, as Director of Fan Relations for Star Wars Corporation. To one extent or another, I'm involved with publicity, merchandising, promotions, marketing, and other behind-the-scenes aspects of 'show biz'. I'm not directly involved with the production end of motion pictures and television, but I am reasonably familiar with it.

I guess you could say I'm a fence-straddler, halfway between being an insider and an outsider. This column will reflect this as I discuss the Hollywood science fiction scene as I see it.

I'm also a science fiction fan. I've been reading science fiction books and watching science fiction films for longer than I can remember. I'm involved with some of the science fiction (and *Star Trek* and comic book) conventions you've probably heard about, and I'm a friend or acquaintance of many of the authors and artists appearing in these pages.

Each installment of this column will be divided into two parts: an essay that explores some aspect of the motion-picture/television industry in some detail, and a collection of news notes of interest to SF readers.

MERCHANDISING SCIENCE FICTION

Science fiction is Big Business.

Between 25 May 1977, and 25 May 1978, a period of one year, over 350 million dollars was spent on tickets to see *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. During a similar period, another 150 million dollars or so was spent on related items—toys, games, books, cups, posters, buttons, tee-shirts, etc. That's over 500 million dollars. Now think about that. Over half a billion dollars was spent on *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters*. \$500,000,000.00+. That's a lot of money.

That's enough money to run a city the size of Los Angeles for six months. Or to telephone London from Los Angeles, and keep the line open for close to eight hundred years.

And that doesn't include any income earned by "Star Trek," "Logan's Run," "Damnation Alley," "Laserblast," "The Six Million Dollar Man," "The Bionic Woman," "Quark," "The Incredible Hulk," "Spiderman," "The Hobbit," or any other science

fiction movie or television show. Admittedly, the cost to produce these shows was less than *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters*, but the income from these was probably close to 200 million dollars.

Seven hundred million dollars isn't a bad take for a genre that used to be considered only a step or two above pornography.

A goodly percentage of the money the public spends on science fiction films and television shows is spent on related merchandise, and it is the related merchandise that is making science fiction big business. Motion pictures and television are already big business. Science fiction is just one theme for them to explore. Now, posters, toys, tee-shirts, and games are turning science fiction into a gold mine.

But how does merchandising work? Who comes up with the ideas? Who can produce the products? Just how much control is there over what kind and quality of merchandise comes out? Let's explore these questions right now.

In order to understand merchandising, you need to have some understanding of Copyright and Trademark Law. Now Copyright and Trademark Law are extremely complex, especially with new federal regulations that recently went into effect. If you ever get into a legal difficulty over a copyright infringement, and your lawyer tells you not to worry because he understands Copyright Law, fire him immediately. The man is either a fool or a liar. No one, not even a specialist, *fully* understands the laws regarding copyrights and trademarks.

Basically, when someone creates a work, either in writing or as artwork, they automatically have what is known as a *common law copyright*. This gives them some protection under the law, but not much. If the appropriate forms and fees are filed with the Register of Copyrights in Washington, DC, the copyright holder is protected legally against *infringement*, which is someone making use of his work without permission. This Registration of Copyright insures that the rights to the work are maintained by the creator, and that he has the right to take any infringers to court in order to protect his work from unauthorized exploitation.

The rights to a given work may be owned by an individual or a company other than the creator of the work, for the creator may sell or give the rights to his work to another individual or company, as he chooses. This is generally the case with published artwork and is almost universally the case with films. A film is usually copyrighted by the production company, rather than by the writer, director, or producer.

The same protection holds true for trademarks. Trademarks, generally, are applied to individual

images, such as characters or logos; while copyrights, generally, are applied to larger works, such as books and films. There are exceptions, of course, and they are what help to make these laws so complicated; but for the purposes of this column, the general rules are sufficient.

When you see this symbol, ©, it means the work is copyrighted. A TM symbol means that a Registration of Trademark has been applied for, and the granting of such a trademark is pending a thorough search for similar trademarks already registered. Once the search has been completed and the Registration of Trademark has been granted, the ® symbol is used, denoting that the trademark has been duly registered. TM, therefore, is like 'patent pending'.

The person or company who filed the Registration of Copyright or the Registration of Trademark is considered the copyright holder or trademark holder, and he has final say over who can or cannot make use of his copyrighted or trademarked works. Therefore, this is the one who determines what products come out based on those works, who produces them, and what the minimum standards of quality are for those products.

It is only fair that the creator of a work have some control over the use of that work. Further, it is only fair that after someone has expended his time, his efforts, and, most importantly, his talents on a work, he should share in any revenues garnered from it. If, for example, you painted a picture, and someone saw that picture, made copies of it, and then sold those copies, wouldn't you feel that you deserved some of the money he got for the copies?

And that is the basis for licenses and royalties.

For every product on the market, there is someone producing it. And if the product is based directly on a film, television show, book, or some other source, the producer of that product has to have a license.

A license, basically, is a contract between a copyright holder and a merchandiser, a person or company who wishes to produce and distribute a product based on the work protected by the copyright held by the copyright holder. This contract may outline exactly what the product is, down to the weight and measurements; or it may only give an approximate description of the product (such as "posters"). The holder of the copyright may demand as many or as few restrictions as he sees fit, and if the prospective merchandiser agrees to the demands of the copyright holder, the contract is signed.

In some cases, the contract may give a merchandiser exclusive rights to a certain class of products. For example, Factors Etc., Inc. of Bear, Delaware, holds the exclusive license to produce all tee-shirts based on *Star Wars*. Had things been done differently, it might have been possible for Factors Etc., Inc. to have only the rights to produce tee-shirts with certain specific designs, and for another company to have the rights to produce tee-shirts with

other designs. It all depends on the agreement reached between the parties involved.

Usually, the company that wants to produce a product will start things by making contact with the copyright (or trademark) holder, although sometimes the copyright holder will seek out a company to produce and merchandise something based on the copyrighted material.

Let's assume the merchandiser makes the first move. The merchandiser will try to convince the copyright holder how good his product will be, how popular it will be, how it will enhance the image of the original work, and how much money it will make for both of them. Generally, the merchandiser will have to outline how he plans to produce the product (posters, for an example); how he plans to distribute them; and how he plans to market, advertise, and promote them. Since the copyright holder doesn't want to give a license to a company that will fall on its face, he will want to check out all these matters before he grants a license.

Along with the details of merchandising, the people making this agreement also work out how they will select and approve the artwork and designs, for there must be a clear understanding on who gets to pick the artwork for our example, the posters. And, of course the final contract, when it has been drawn up for signature, will include an agreement about money: how much will the merchandiser pay the copyright holder for the rights to exploit the copyright holder's work with these posters.

This brings us back to the idea that a work's creator should get a share of the revenues garnered by his works. Rather than a flat fee, licensing contracts generally call for the merchandiser to pay the copyright holder a fixed percentage (often 10%) of the income from the sales of the items related to his work. There is also, usually, a guaranteed minimum the merchandiser will pay during each year the contract is in effect. For example, our poster manufacturer might promise to pay the copyright holder 10% of the money he gets for each poster, and guarantee that he will sell at least 100,000 posters for \$1.00 each during the next year. He is guaranteeing to pay the copyright holder at least \$10,000 in royalty payments. This contract might also stipulate that the poster manufacturer will pay \$1,000 to the copyright holder at the time of signing, as an advance deposit on the royalties to be paid.

Of course, the merchandiser wants to make money, so he tries to be very careful about which properties he gets licenses for. He tries to find a popular personality (such as Suzanne Sommers, Henry Winkler, Shaun Cassidy, Mark Hamill), or a popular film (like *Star Wars*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Rocky*, *Logan's Run*), or a popular television program (e.g.: *"Star Trek"*, *"The Hardy Boys"*, *"The Man from Atlantis"*, *"The Six Million Dollar Man"*) and to make up commercial, salable items around that personality, film, or program.

The item can be almost anything, though lunch boxes, toys, and dolls are traditional. In recent

years, posters, buttons, and tee-shirts have become increasingly popular. In fact, probably the largest selling *Star Wars*-related items are toys (from Kenner; 1014 Vine St., Cincinnati OH 45202) and posters and illustrated tee-shirts (from Factors Etc., Inc., Geissler Park, Bear, DE 17001). Of course, there are items with a more limited appeal, such as the ceramic mugs crafted by Jim Rumph. These large drinking mugs are an item that wouldn't normally appeal to children, and their suggested retail price of \$15 each certainly takes them out of the children's market. But when they were test-marketed recently in a few middle-sized cities, such as Phoenix AZ, they sold very well indeed.

Merchandising—personality merchandising—has grown up from an industry of small manufacturers of novelty items designed mainly for children to a major industry aimed at the young, the old, and everyone in between.

Merchandisers try to keep abreast of the times. They try to keep a watch on the newspapers, television, and the nation's pulse—in the case of some merchandisers, the world's pulse. To make money, merchandisers have to have their products on the market when the personality, film, or television program's popularity is at its peak, for it is then that the greatest number of sales will occur. And it is for that reason that merchandisers try to get their representatives into preview screenings of films. The smarter and quicker a company is, the more successful they will be at personality merchandising.

One such company is Factors Etc., Inc. of Bear, Delaware. Factors is one of the world's largest purveyors of personality items, producing items based on Farrah Fawcett-Majors, Sylvester Stallone, Elvis Presley, and *Star Wars*, among others. Before *Star Wars* opened in any theater, Factors acquired the rights to produce posters and tee-shirts. I asked Phillip Moody, Director of Creative Development for Factors, "Why?"

He told me that Factors picked up the licenses for *Star Wars* based on a "gut feeling" of his. He'd turned down an option on the merchandising rights to the new *King Kong* because he felt that the new version just wouldn't be successful. To help bolster this feeling, he went to the premiere of *King Kong*; and the thing that he saw there that impressed him most was the trailer for *Star Wars*. "It blew me away. I sat there and thought, 'This is the next *Jaws*!' I thought of it as a merchandising thing. I didn't realize how much bigger than *Jaws* it would be. I thought of it as something that could be run throughout the summer, not as something that would go on for years.

"Science fiction, of course, is very popular right now. It's become respectable, and science has finally caught up with it. With black holes and white holes, telekinesis and levitation, people are looking for a new perspective, and are ready to accept science fiction.

"*Star Wars* had something else going for it, in terms of merchandising. It had visuals. People want a personality or film they can have a vicarious iden-

tification with. *Close Encounters* didn't have any real personalities that people wanted to identify with. It was too real. The characters in *Close Encounters* just didn't stand out. And the sales figures prove it. The film has done very well at the box office, but the merchandise just hasn't sold.

"With *Star Wars*, there were all kinds of characters to identify with—R2-D2, C-3PO, the Wookie, Darth Vader, even Luke. They were all colorful and exciting, and you felt like you wanted to identify with them."

While the decision to go after the rights to *Star Wars* was based on instinct, it was instinct derived from years of experience. And that experience seems to be saying that the more colorful and the more varied from everyday life, the more successful a personality, film, or television program will be in terms of merchandising. And there is little that is more colorful, or more varied from everyday life than science fiction.

WORKS IN PROGRESS AND OTHER NEWS

For reasons not entirely clear to me, most SF readers are real fans of the work of Chuck Jones, one of the all-time greats of cartoon animation, who's perhaps best known for his "Road-Runner" animated shorts. He is tentatively planning a new series of short, 7-10 minute cartoons for release to theaters rather than for television. Negotiations are underway with Warner Brothers.

Together with Warner Brothers and CBS, Jones is also preparing a feature-length compilation of his Bugs Bunny and Road Runner Cartoons, to be called *The Great Bugs Bunny / Road Runner Chase*. The compilation will be made up of some complete cartoons, sections of some other cartoons, and 20 minutes of new animation directed by Jones. Unlike the other compilations that have appeared on TV, this one will be directly under Chuck Jones's control. It hasn't been decided whether this will be a theatrical or television release.

Also in the works from Chuck Jones Productions is a new version of Jones's classic cartoon, *Duck Dodgers in the 24th and One-Half Century*. The new version, *Duck Dodgers and the Return of the 24th and One-Half Century*, will have Steven Spielberg (writer-director of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*) working on the script. The new cartoon may be released to theatres with Spielberg's next feature, *1941*, on which Jones is working as a consultant.

Steven Spielberg's office has announced that a sequel to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* will be made as soon as *1941* is completed. The story line for *CE3K II* is not being divulged yet.

Bill Melendez, who does the *Peanuts* television specials and feature films, has acquired the rights to C. S. Lewis's *Narnia Chronicles*. Starting off with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, currently in production in England, Melendez is planning to air the animated film as 2 one-hour specials seen on con-

secutive nights. CBS plans to air the specials around Easter 1979. If they are successful, the other books in the series will be filmed.

Bob Balaban, who played the interpreter in *Close Encounters*, has written a book called *Close Encounters of the Third Kind Diary*. The book doesn't tell much about the special effects, but it's an interesting and insightful view of how an actor feels while acting, and what went on throughout the production. The book contains dozens of black and white photos, has an introduction by Steven Spielberg, and is wonderfully entertaining. Published by Paradise Press, the book is well worth its \$1.95 cover price. Highly recommended.

Walt Disney Productions is working on a fantasy film called *The Spaceman and King Arthur*. The film, which is very loosely based on *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, is about a scientist who accidentally gets locked into a space capsule with his identical, lookalike android. The capsule ends up in England at the time of Arthur, and our hero must prove himself to be neither a demon nor a monster, and save the populace—and King Arthur—from the evil and duplicity of Mordred and Merlin. In this version, these two work as a team of evil-doers. The science is tolerable, if somewhat shaky; and the script looks better than that of most live-action Disney films.

Twentieth Century Fox is preparing a new science fiction thriller called *Alien*. The film, written by Dan O'Bannon (*Dark Star*), Walter Hill, and David Giler, concerns a deep-space tug which intercepts an alien distress signal. The story of what they encounter and the effective special effects can make this an excellent film.

Star Wars Corporation is working on the sequel to *Star Wars*, called *The Empire Strikes Back*. Based on *The Adventures of Luke Skywalker*, a series of unpublished short stories by George Lucas, the sequel will be a continuation of the first film. The first draft of the screenplay was written by Leigh Brackett just prior to her death.

There will be a greater emphasis on the characters and their development in this film, with the romantic rivalry between Luke Skywalker and Han Solo over Princess Leia being resolved. Along with Luke, Han, and the Princess, R2-D2, C-3PO, Chewbacca, and Darth Vader will return. Also, more human and alien characters will be introduced.

Irving Kershner is director for the sequel. George Lucas is the executive producer; Gary Kurtz is back as the producer.

Norman Reynolds, who won an Academy Award for his art direction on *Star Wars*, is the production designer for *The Empire Strikes Back*. Stuart Freeborn is back as makeup supervisor, and John Williams is back doing the music. Brian Johnson is the new special effects supervisor. His credits include *2001: A Space Odyssey* (with Doug Trumbull), *Alien*, and

Space 1999.

Special effects photography began in October, with principal photography to begin in February of 1979. The tentative release date is spring of 1980.

Ralph Bakshi will be releasing his version of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. This 2½-hour animated film will appear about the same time as this issue sees print. The film was shot entirely in live action, with actors in costumes, and then retoscoped, an animation process involving the frame-by-frame drawing of previously photographed live action. The technique, although frequently used in making animated films, is seldom used as extensively as Bakshi has employed it here. Bakshi's enthusiasm and love for this project, as well as his love for animation, should provide an interesting film. I have only seen one scene from the film, and I had a mixed reaction to it. Some of it was extremely good—it had a very life-like, three-dimensional feel to it. Other parts of the scene (the death of Boromir) didn't sit quite right with me. I think the film will be good, overall. While most of Bakshi's previous films received mixed reactions, he has been one of the few animated-film makers who has been willing to experiment in new directions. He has certainly helped to open up the field of animated films to a broader spectrum of material. *The Lord of the Rings* and its concluding sequel, along with the British film, *WaterShip Down*, which is currently in release, should show that animated films can be used for serious, dramatic projects as well as fairy tales and funny animals.

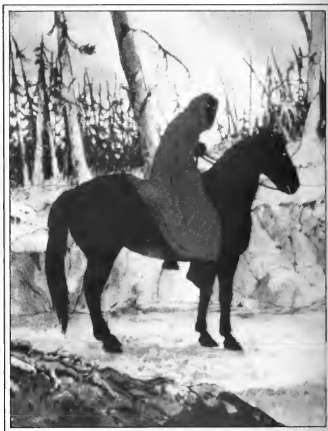
Buck Rogers is coming back, this time to television screens. NBC is preparing a two-hour movie-for-television as a pilot for a possible series. This version of *Buck Rogers* will include many of the original characters and plot devices: Buck, an astronaut in the year 1987, is frozen into suspended animation while exploring deep space. When his ship finally returns to Earth orbit, he is greeted not by Houston, but by the much-changed Earth of the 25th century. Wilma Deering, Dr. Huer, and Killer Kane will be back, with Kane evilly involved with the conquering Draconian race.

John Landis, who directed *National Lampoon's Animal House*; *Kentucky Fried Movie*; and *Schlock*, the monster comedy, is directing Lily Tomlin in *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*. Landis describes this new quasi-version of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* as the first "epic science fiction domestic comedy" and "a cross between *Star Wars* and 'I Love Lucy'."

A new version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* will be released in December of this year. Starring Donald Sutherland, Leonard Nimoy, and Brooke Adams, the feature is intended to capture the suspense and drama present in the original version of this film. This time the pods do their dirty work in San Francisco, rather than in the small town of Santa Mira.

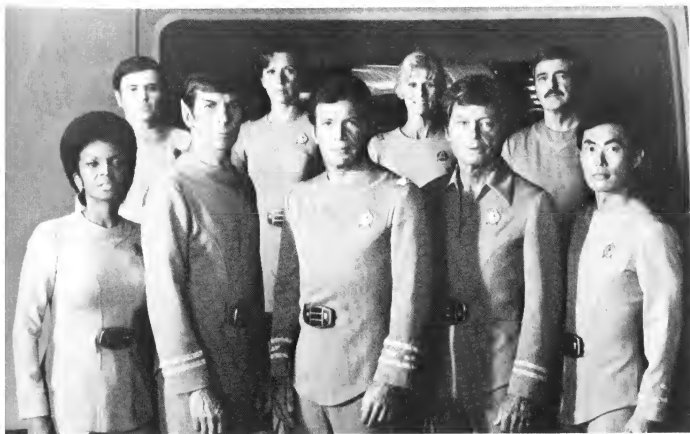


Above, merchants are discovering that science fiction can be big business. Star Wars memorabilia are especially popular. Below, some scenes from the soon-to-be-released Ralph Bakshi production of Lord of the Rings. Special production techniques should make this animated film particularly interesting.





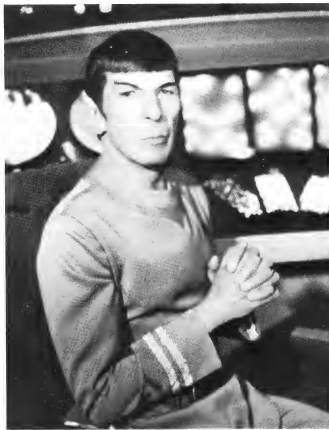




Above, the original crew of the Enterprise is reunited for Star Trek—The Motion Picture. Left to right, Nichelle Nichols, Walter Koenig, Leonard Nimoy, Majel Barrett, William Shatner, Grace Lee Whitney, De Forest Kelley, James Doohan, and George Takei. Below left, Kirk, Spock, and McCoy on the bridge; right, Mr. Spock in a characteristic moment of repose.



All photos this page courtesy Paramount Pictures © 1978.



Star Trek—The Motion Picture has been in production since 7 August. The completion date is still uncertain, so they haven't been able to set a release date more certain than "sometime in 1979."

The film begins with three Klingon cruisers on patrol in their own territory suddenly faced by an unknown intruder. The intruder proves too powerful for them, instantly destroying each ship. This shocks and stuns those viewing the proceedings from a Starfleet Monitor Station, who transmit a report to Starfleet Headquarters that the alien intruder is headed for Earth.

The U.S.S. *Enterprise*, which has been completely rebuilt and refitted since last seeing action, is ordered back into service to combat the emergency. Captain Kirk is once more placed in command of

the *Enterprise*, with his entire executive staff at his side. Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy are the only ones missing. McCoy arrives just as the ship is about to leave orbit, and Spock arrives later under what are described as "surprising circumstances."

Two new members of the executive staff are the navigator, Ilia, an alien female; and Captain Willard Decker, the *Enterprise's* most recent commander until Starfleet Command placed Kirk back aboard and in command. Needless to say, Captain Decker is not happy about the loss of command.

As the crew familiarizes itself with the new advanced equipment and weaponry of the *Enterprise*, Kirk orders the ship into space. Heading toward them and toward Earth is an alien intruder with "the most incredible, most destructive power ever encountered." After that, I am sure, things get exciting.



THROUGH TIME AND SPACE WITH FERDINAND FEGHOOT!!

by Grendel Briarton

illustrated by Tim Kirk



In 2147, after conquering the one hundred countries surrounding his capital, the mighty Bwasimba I proclaimed himself Emperor of Africa and announced a grand feast of celebration by the banks of his ancestral Ngusi River.

"One problem remains—" he told Ferdinand Feghoot. "An anthem worthy of me and my fame. But don't worry—our delectable freshwater eels are an unfailing source of omens and oracles."

Tables were set for the Court, and tens of thousands of subjects thronged the high riverside cliffs. Suddenly, excited shouts interrupted their cheering. The Imperial Fishermen had come with their catch, dancing triumphantly—and their ancient chief carried the biggest, most splendid eel ever seen!

Instantly, the crowd went out of control. They swept the old man off his feet. He lost his grip on the huge, squirming eel—which fell off the cliff and was lost again in the river.

Bwasimba, ecstatic a moment before, belabored in anguish.

"Calm yourself, Serene Highness!" soothed Feghoot. "All is not lost. You now have your anthem—the *Marseillaise*!"

"For that wretched mob?" roared Bwasimba. "It's too good for them! They lost me the finest eel in the world!"

"Exactly," said Ferdinand Feghoot. "That was your oracle. Wasn't it a mob that brought about the fall of the best eel?"

HOW IT HAPPENED

by Isaac Asimov

illustrated by Frank Borth

There's a perfectly simple explanation—doing it right would have cost so much!



My brother began to dictate in his best oratorical style, the one which has the tribes hanging on his words.

"In the beginning," he said, "exactly 15.2 billion years ago, there was a big bang and the Universe—"

But I had stopped writing. "Fifteen billion years ago?" I said incredulously.

"Absolutely," he said, "I'm inspired."

"I don't question your inspiration," I said. (I had better not. He's three years younger than I am, but I don't try questioning his inspiration. Neither does anyone else or there's hell to pay.) "But are you going to tell the story of the Creation over a period of fifteen billion years?"

"I have to," said my brother. "That's how long it took. I have it all in here," he tapped his forehead, "and it's on the very highest authority."

By now I had put down my reed pen. "Do you know the price of papyrus?" I said.

"What?" (He may be inspired, but I frequently noticed that the inspiration didn't include such sordid matters as the price of papyrus.)

I said, "Suppose you describe one million

years of events to each roll of papyrus. That means you'll have to fill fifteen thousand rolls. You'll have to talk long enough to fill them, and you know that you begin to stammer after a while. I'll have to write enough to fill them, and my fingers will fall off. And even if we can afford all that papyrus and you have the voice and I have the strength, who's going to copy it? We've got to have a guarantee of a hundred copies before we can publish, and without that where will we get royalties from?"

My brother thought a while. He said, "You think I ought to cut it down?"

"Way down," I said, "if you expect to reach the public."

"How about a hundred years?" he said.

"How about six days?" I said.

He said, horrified, "You can't squeeze Creation into six days."

I said, "This is all the papyrus I have. What do you think?"

"Oh, well," he said, and began to dictate again, "In the beginning—Does it have to be six days, Aaron?"

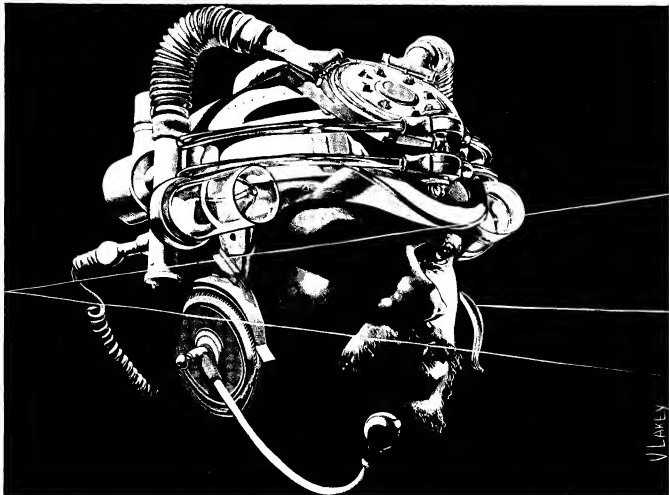
I said, firmly, "Six days, Moses."



THE CASQUE OF LAMONT T. YADO

by Victor
Milan

illustrated
by Val Lakey



There was more between us than the usual rivalry of Tracer and Jumper. There was hate, and hurt, and the need to set things right.

"You can get it?" he asked, leaning forward. His face was a blur but I could envision the keenness in it. "You can get to the helmet?"

I sat back trying to look cooler than I felt. "The Adarak casque," I nodded. "But it won't be easy."

He started to speak, but cut it off at the slight pop that meant someone was entering the sound-dampening field around our booth. He looked up suspiciously, but it was only the waitress bringing our drinks. Scotch straight up for Trago, nepenthine for me. If he noticed my choice of drink he didn't show it.

The waitress went away. She may have been pretty. The bar was dark as only cheap bars and fancy restaurants can be, but even if it had been decently lighted I wouldn't have seen her clearly. My new eyes didn't work all that well.

The damper field gave off its reassuring sub-

liminal buzz again. "Don' worry, mon," Trago said with mock-Jamaican assurance. He was born in Greater Harlem. That island accent came from hours with a tape recorder. "I for you all that needs to be done."

I sipped my drink, needing its numbing touch. My left arm was acting up. It felt though it belonged to someone else—which did, being a transplant.

"The Yado Memorial Museum is equipped with an absolutely impenetrable security system," I said. "Impenetrable to any normal mode of entry. But not to entry through Jumpspace."

It seemed his eyes narrowed. "Not possible, mon," he said. "You should know that. Surf jumping no can be done. The lines are confused too bad."

"It's been done. A man on one of the fringe worlds made three jumps planetside before he went in and didn't come out." I settled my elbows on the tabletop. "Or don't you think you

can do it? You're the best Tracer alive, the best since Yado himself. *But . . .* I let my voice trail off.

He drew back as though considering it, but the tension in his posture betrayed him. The stab at his vanity had been unnecessary. Once he thought he could actually get the casque he was hooked.

They all seem to have it, that packrat acquisitiveness. Scientists think it has something to do with the mescaline derivatives Tracers keep themselves primed with, to heighten their sensitivity to the twisted back alleys between the stars. They can't resist bright things, pretty things, valuable things, and nothing was more valuable than the Adarak casque, sole relic on Earth of a long-dead race.

There'd been a pretty thing too, once, that Trago had been unable to resist. A woman I'd loved. That was why I was here.

"When do we do it, then?" he demanded.

"Tonight."

He cocked his head. "But why, mon?" he asked, "Why you doing this for me? Thought maybe you have a grudge against me."

I fought the urge to laugh. A love lost, two of my friends dead, three years of my life spent in a rehab satellite being pieced back into a shoddy counterfeit of myself, and I owed it all to him. Why should I have a grudge?

The thing was, I knew damned well he didn't really think I bore him any ill will. He'd done nothing wrong—from his standpoint. I'd stood between him and something he desired. He had removed an obstacle. Nothing more. No hard feelings.

Sure.

Control, I told myself, and forced my mouth around a smile. "Bygones and all that. This is a business proposition. Profit for me, profit for you. And you're the only man for the job."

He smiled at that. "Yeah, right, mon," he said, preening. "Tracergod is good to me, no?"

Greed and pride. Trago was the favored of the Tracers' private deity. So he thought. Greed and pride.

I felt dizzy, clutched my glass as if for support. There they were, my memories: a girl, lithe and bright and lovely. Linda. I loved her. Trago coveted her.

There'd been a newly opened world out toward Achernar, and Trago had come to me with a Jump-pattern he claimed would get me there a week before my competition. I believed him—why not? He was the best.

So I went. Linda stayed on Earth, where

Trago was.

Our eighth bounce dropped us close to the Schwarzschild radius of a black hole. We couldn't jump out—if we'd tried that near a singularity we would have dropped out of space for good. It took twenty-seven hours' torching at a higher gee than the human frame is meant to withstand to free us.

My two partners didn't make it. I did, after a fashion. When the rescue craft answered our Mayday they found me unconscious, my muscles torn free of the bones, internal organs a hemorrhaging mess, ruptured eyeballs running down my face. But I was alive.

I'll say this for Trago. I don't think he meant us to be squeezed slowly to death. I think he never expected us to come out of Jumpspace.

They rebuilt me. My left arm was replaced, the muscles of my right knit back together with microscopic wire—a transplant limb never works as well as the original, and I needed full use of my right hand. New eyes were grown for me in a tank. The optic nerve join didn't take, leaving me with blurred and uncorrectable vision. But I was alive.

What more to say? I'd been reported lost. I was out of Trago's way. My lady was gone, with him, when I got back. I searched a long time, but I never saw her again. He'd discarded her like a toy he'd grown tired of. She'd been a prize, and his pleasure was its winning.

What did the ancient author say? For vengeance to be complete, there must be no way for retribution to overtake the avenger. I'd had many bleak months to think about repaying Trago. And I had new knowledge of Adarak technology that hadn't yet reached Earth.

So now I had him before me, disarming him with my easy smile. He had no thought of danger. "Tracergod is good to you," I agreed aloud.

"So let's do it, mon," he said.

"So let's do it."

The darkness in Trago's room was marred only by a candle and the glow from his seeker-unit. I sat on a hassock that bled stuff-
ing onto the floor. My legs ached from the short walk to and from the cab.

Trago played with his console. The walls were lined with niches for the icons of the Tracers' strange religion. Incense fumes tickled my nose, made my head swim. He made a last adjustment, then sat back on his heels like one of his idols. His black eyes rolled up into his head.

How much of the Tracers' mysticism is anything more than mumbo-jumbo they no more than half-believe themselves I can't say. They claim they need the help of their god to locate Jumplines. Theirs is not a proselytizing religion—they say no one can comprehend it who hasn't been in Tracer-trance, and only those born with the right genes can enter it.

I know the principles of Tracing, though, being a Jumper. Our universe is a spiderweb construct bound together by an intricate network of—what? Probability lines? Ectoplasm? No one can say, but they're there, just beyond seeing—beyond, to anyone but a Tracer.

Not every point is linked to every other, and some paths lead nowhere but the tawny limbo between dimensions. The Tracers sense and hunt down these corridors with the aid of consoles, drugs, and their god, ferreting out routes from star to star. They Trace, then the Jumpers follow the pathways they map. That's how we hoped to get into the LaMont T. Yado Memorial Museum.

Time didn't pass. It simply was not. Trago's fingers crept spider-like across a keyboard, apparently aimless.

Sweat formed in glassy drops on Trago's forehead. I watched one crawl down his nose and drip into his lap. I watched a number of them before he opened his eyes.

"Tricky, mon," he said. "Why no one try this before. The mass of the planet, she twist the lines bad. But we can do it, eh, mon? You as good a Jumper as I'm a Tracer—almost." He laughed hugely.

He stood up and made passes at a wall printout between niches. The idols gazed out inscrutably, vague in the candlelight. He came back shortly with long sheets covered with figures.

I studied the figures closely. Just as mass can bend light, it can affect Jumplines. A misjudgement by either of us could return us to realspace underground or inside the wall of the Museum.

Whatever else you could say about Trago, he had skill. His Trace was tricky but short, involving only one jump. That was lucky. The fact that we were a handful of kilometers away from the Museum meant nothing; we might have had to make a half-dozen jumps around the globe to get inside.

Through the dimness in the room and my eyes I saw him looking at me. "Traced an escape route to coordinates you gave me," he said, and grinned. "Spacer cemetery, no?"

I nodded. I feared he might balk, but he

didn't. It appealed to his sense of humor.

I didn't need much time to make the settings on my one-man jump harnesses and slave Trago's to mine. He put his on and then helped me into my unit. With my arms the way they were it wasn't easy to do by myself.

I fit the Jumper's helmet over my head. A small yellow dot pulsed in the middle of the opaque goggles. It would be my beacon in Jumpspace.

I wrapped my hands around the control handles and took a deep breath. Would we make it? And did it matter? They tell me death is the end of pain.

We jumped. There was a sense of discontinuity, an interphase, and then we were hanging in Jumpspace. Around us was nothing—less than nothing.

The spot on the goggles glowed white. By slight pressures on the handle I kept it lined up. I felt a resistance like wind blowing against the side of a moving car. As near as we were to the planet there was a big chance of us drifting fatally off course.

But Jumpspace is my home. I was at ease. My limbs no longer pained me and my sight was clear. I held us true till the dot flashed red.

Transition. Lacking substance, life, existence. A single monochromatic thought: *whatifsomething'swrong?* Then through, free and clear.

A moment of dizziness. The hall loomed around us in a haze of darkness. It smelled of dust and oiled metal, a closed system and endlessly recycled air. The house that Yado built, home for the oddities that the first Tracer brought back from his explorations, artifacts, minerals, living beings. Priceless all, but none more so than the Adarak helmet.

Trago saw it first. I heard him gasp. I turned and almost fainted.

Since we'd jumped in no security mechanism was aware of our presence. But my first thought was we'd alerted some terrible watchman, two meters tall and articulated like a giant insect, its head a flaring dome, fanged and horned and spiked.

Trago's relieved laugh broke the spell. An artist's reconstruction of an Adarak warrior-drone wore the casque. The Adarak had come close to conquering our arm of the galaxy with their ferocity and technology. Even in lifeless plastic their image was frightening to look upon.

"God of all the Tracers," Trago murmured.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" I whispered, though the thing repelled me. One of two such casques

ever found. It was a time dilation device of some sort, dimly understood, that slowed time or speeded the wearer, depending on your point of view. The result was a warrior with reflexes faster than the finest ballistic computer.

I'd been present when they took the other one apart, a few hundred light-years away. They hadn't figured out how to duplicate it, but they'd gotten some idea of how it worked.

And so had I.

Trago wasted no time. He plucked the casque off the plastic skull and started to put it on his head like Charlemagne crowning himself Holy Roman Emperor. I was fast enough to twitch it out of his hands as hell broke loose around us.

"Not safe!" I howled over the alarm din. "Booby traps!" He nodded. At the hall's end doors opened and guards shouted. I touched the controls of my Jump harness. The hall washed out like an overexposed photograph. A dazzle of light from a guard's handgun went through me, but we were already out of his world. All I felt was a tingle. Jumpspace closed in . . .

. . . and we floated, starless. . . .

Grass was beneath us, wet with dew, and the stars were hard overhead. I staggered and almost fell—we'd come out with our feet a centimeter above the ground. Trago made no move to help me.

Around us gravestones stood like blunt white teeth. Here and there a monumental statue regarded the dead with sightless dignity. The night was still.

"You fix it, mon," Trago ordered. "I want to try it."

I'll bet you do, I thought. He had no idea I saw the look of exultation cross his face as I bent over the casque. The alien metal was cool in my hands.

For some reason my fingers had little of their usual clumsiness. The necessary adjustments were quickly made. I straightened. "There."

From the corner of my eye I saw a black arm descending. I sidestepped frantically so the cosh struck sparks off my skull without putting me out. The ground smacked me wetly in the face, smelling like early spring.

Then the helmet was on Trago's head, thrumming with pseudolife as it attuned itself to its new master. The Adarak had used auxiliaries of other races, some reliable enough to be entrusted with such weapons. The casque was an adaptable, artificial symbiote.

"I feel it!" Trago crowed. "The power—"

Tracergod, the power! I'm growing, mon—I'm too big for this world!"

I rolled feebly to my side. My stomach was awash with nausea. "What about my share?" I croaked.

"Your share?" He laughed. His teeth were very white. "I'll give you your share, mon." He stepped toward me, shedding his harness as I started to my feet.

"Can't leave you hangin' 'round," Trago said, grinning beneath the sweep of the helmet. The power of the casque was upon him. He came at my swinging.

It was as though he moved through thick oil. Groggy cripple though I was, I evaded the blow easily as momentum carried him by. He turned to face me, features showing the desperate knowledge that something was wrong with him.

"What—is—this?" he asked, thickly, as though his tongue were swollen.

"They tore a casque apart on Bryan's World," I panted. "I was called in to consult as an expert in Jump mechanics." He made another grab at me. I moved back.

"They thought the t-d effect had some relation to the physics of the Jump grid. Couldn't find a link. But they did find ways to gimmick the t-d mechanism some."

His eyes were uncomprehending as flakes of volcanic glass. Muscles bunched and ground beneath his skin as he fought the terrible lethargy overcoming him. "Don' . . . un-der-stand," he slurred.

"I reversed the time dilation process. You're slowing down, Trago, and there's nothing you can do to stop it. In a few seconds you'll be motionless as a metal statue. But awake, aware of every endless instant." I gave him a feral grin. He tried futilely to snatch the helmet off, then swiped at me, slow as ages, as forgiving. I dodged without effort.

"You'll seem to be a statue—one among many. One more monument to the dead. My dead." Faces—I saw the faces then. The dead, the lost. Among them mine.

"I hope they melt you down for scrap, Trago," I said. "Think pleasant thoughts, iron man, Tracer, whoreson bastard."

I turned and started walking. My step was lighter than it had been in years. Behind me I heard laborious groaning, like an unplugged tape recorder winding down. But his final words were clear: "For the love of Tracergod, mon!"

"Yes," I said. "For the love of God." And walked on.



LONGSHOT

by Jack C. Haldeman II

illustrated by Jack Gaughan

The tale told in a bar has a long and distinguished history in our field, beginning with Lord Dunsany's stories of Mr. Joseph Jorkens and the Billiards Club, Arthur C. Clarke's White Hart, Fletcher Pratt's and L. Sprague de Camp's Gavan's Bar, and more currently, Richard Wilson's 5280 Club, Spider Robinson's Callahan's Crosstime Saloon, and Larry Niven's Draco Tavern. Here, Mr. Haldeman has taken his series of strange sports stories to an off-world bar.

"Hot up? Humph! A sure thing? I don't want to hear about it." The spacer slammed his drink on the bar and looked the robot bartender right in the electronic eye. "I've been from one side of this universe to the other and if I haven't learned anything else, I've learned that there's no such thing as a sure thing."

The bartender whirled and polished another glass.

"Sure I've played the ponies. I've been around. Nags on Old Earth, Bat Flies on Medi IV,

Fuzzies on Niven—I've played them all money on the nose. Was a time you couldn't keep me away from the tracks. Not any more. I learned my lesson, but good. How 'bout another? A double."

The robot swallowed the empty glass, produced a full one. He sighed deep in his gearworks, afraid that this was going to be another burned-out spacer with a tale to tell.

It was.

The spacer's name was Terry Freeland, al-

though everybody called him Crash, and his story was bound to be a tale of woe. Judging from the stubble on his face and the condition of his clothes, he hadn't lifted ship in a long time. Besides, if he had any money he wouldn't be drinking in a dump like this.

Except for a run of bad luck, thought the robot, I wouldn't be pulling beers in a place like this, either. Still, it beat pumping gas.

"It was on Dimian. You know Dimian? Out in the Rigel sector?" asked Crash, sipping his drink.

The robot nodded. He knew Dimian. A real back-water planet.

"Well, I was landing at the spaceport at Chingo. They got a lot of nerve calling it a spaceport, buncha gravel out in the middle of nowhere. Only two bars in the whole of Chingo, and it's the biggest town on Dimian. Some spaceport. Anyway, I was hauling a load of Venusian lettuce mold hoping to swing a big deal for some dutrinium. Wheeling and dealing, that's my game. Those sentients on Dimian really get off on lettuce mold. So I was coming in for a landing, you know, and... hey, I don't know what you've heard about me, but it ain't true I make a habit of bustin' up ships. Just had a few hard landings and a little bad luck, that's all. Like that time. They said I was drunk, but I say their null-field wasn't working right. Sure I'd had a shot or two while I was hanging in orbit, but that don't mean nothing. Do it all the time. Came down a little hard, that's all. Bent a stabilizer. Crunched a couple of scouts, but they were parked where they shouldn't 'a been. Anyway..."

It was looking to be a near total loss. They were overstocked on lettuce mold and Crash's profits didn't amount to much more than it took to fix the stabilizer and the two scouts. He hadn't been able to carry insurance since that time on Waycross, so everything was out-of-pocket. Still, he'd managed to pick up a load of dutrinium dirt cheap and if they'd ever finish fixing the stabilizer, maybe he'd be able to unload it on some other planet for big bucks.

He was always looking for big bucks. That's why he went to the track. That's why he listened to Whisky John. It was a mistake. Nobody listened to Whisky John. Nobody with any sense, that is.

Whisky John was born bad news.

"I tell you, it can't miss," said Whisky John. "These yo-yos don't know the first thing about handicapping."

"You mean they actually race these

monsters?"

"Sure. That's the whole idea. These Dimians don't know nothing. They work 'em in the field till they get too old to cut the mustard, then they turn 'em loose on the track. These Dimians are crazy wild about betting. Most only thing to do around here."

"So where's the edge?" asked Crash.

"What you do is find one that's been out in the field a long time but hasn't done much work. He may be old, but he'll probably have a few kilometers left in him. I got it straight from B'rax, a stableboy who sweeps out the stalls, that the sleeper of the year is going to be Heller."

"Heller?"

"That's the one. Eighty-five years old and getting pretty long in the tooth. But he was owned by National and they don't do much dredging, so he's had an easy life. He's the longshot. Two hundred to one. *Two hundred to one!*"

Crash cast a doubtful eye over the field. Monsters they were, too. The natives called them something unpronounceable that was roughly translated as "behemoths". It was an understatement. They looked like three elephants piled one on top of another. Had about as many legs, too. Thirty meters high and Lord knows what they weighed. Crash figured they could dredge pretty good, but he had a hard time imagining them racing around a track.

"Two hundred to one, you say? Eighty-five years old?"

"A sure thing. You can't lose."

"If you're so smart, how come you ain't rich?" asked Crash.

"Bad luck and hard times," said Whisky John wistfully, "I've had more than my share of both. Believe me, if I had any cash I'd put it right on that beast's, er, nose. Had to let you in on this. Figure I owe you one from that time on Farbly." He winked and Crash blushed. It had been close on Farbly, that's for sure. They'd been lucky to get out at all.

"I don't know," said Crash.

"How much you got? Cash."

"Free and clear? Let me see, after the stabilizer, uh... about 500 creds."

"Think about it. One hundred thousand creds! Free and clear. No taxes on Dimian. You could get a bigger cruiser, anything. Think about it."

Crash thought about it and the more he thought about it the better it seemed. It was all the cash he had and if he lost it he'd have to

eat peanut butter crackers till he dumped the dutrinium. But still—*One Hundred Thousand Creds!*

He placed the bet.

Together they climbed into the stands; tall, rickety old wooden bleachers a good half click from the track. There were a few offworlders scattered through the crowd, even a couple more humans, but mostly it was wall-to-wall Dimians. Whisky John was right about one thing—Dimians were sure crazy wild about behemoth racing.

Crash didn't know much about the Dimians, except that he thought they were weird. They probably thought Crash was weird, too. They looked like crickets, were about a meter tall, and talked in a high, squeaking rasp that Crash couldn't understand. Whisky John could speak it a little on account of his being marooned on Dimian for a good many years waiting for his ship to come in. Every time he got a few creds ahead, he'd blow it away with some crazy scheme. Whisky John was a mite irresponsible.

Down on the track, several Dimians were herding the behemoths towards the starting line. Crash noted with pleasure that Heller was still listed on the tote board at 200-1.

The Dimians moved the beasts along with huge prods, never getting closer to one than necessary. Crash didn't blame them, they were dwarfed by the massive animals. Looked like mountains being led around by small bugs. Hairy mountains.

"Where are the jockeys?" asked Crash.

"What jockeys? You couldn't pay a Dimian enough to climb on top of one of those monsters," replied Whisky John.

"How do they get around the track?"

"Sometimes they don't. When that starting gun goes off they go where they damn well please. Mostly they head around the track, though, since that's the way they're pointing at the beginning. They ain't too smart."

"Which one's Heller? I can't make out the numbers."

"It's easy to tell. He's the one on the left."

"No!"

"Yes."

If behemoths were mountains, Heller was a mountain with rickets. Most of his hair had fallen out. He was a mountain with a bad case of the mange. Half his legs didn't look like they worked right. Where the others had gleaming tusks, Heller had rotten stumps. Where the others had blazing eyes, Heller had sad, dull orbs. He had loser written all over him.

"You mean my money's on *that*?"

"Smart money, too. You can't tell a book by its cover, I always say. He can still hit the fast ball, probably tear the track apart." Whisky John was an incurable optimist, especially with other people's money.

"He's blind as a bat. He can't walk. He looks like he's a hundred years old."

"Eighty-five," corrected Whisky John.

"If he's eighty-five, how old are the others?"

"Average out about thirty, I reckon. That's good for an old behemoth. But remember he's two hundred to one. He's had an easy life."

"Easy life? He looks like a hundred miles of bad road." Crash was trying to figure out if he had time to strangle Whisky John and still run down to get his money back before the race started.

He was too late. The race started.

Crash could tell the race started because the Dimians in the crowd went wild, screaming and jumping up and down. It was harder to tell by looking at the behemoths, though, because they just seemed to be wandering aimlessly around, bumping into each other.

"This is a race?"

"Exciting, isn't it?" said Whisky John.

Three of the behemoths started lurching more or less down the track and the spectators went wild. Some of the others followed the leaders, including, to Crash's surprise, Heller. He wasn't last, either. Not if you counted the two behemoths that had fallen down and the one that was going the wrong way. Crash felt a faint hope rising.

"Come on, Heller," he shouted in desperation, pounding Whisky John on the shoulder.

It soon became apparent why the stands were so far from the track. Once the behemoths started, they went any old which way and didn't stop for anything. Unless, of course, they fell down. They were very good at falling down. They were better at falling down than running. Each time one toppled over, the ground shook. One had crashed through the fence around the track and was wandering out into the desert. Heller was in fourth place and losing ground rapidly.

He had to win or it was peanut butter crackers for Crash. Lots of peanut butter crackers.

The track was a jumble of lurching, tottering behemoths. Half of them had fallen down. The falling down part was easy, but the getting up was hard. Some of them just fell asleep after they flopped, only to be woken up by another one stumbling into him. They were the clumsiest animals Crash had ever seen. The lead

behemoth got his legs all tangled up and went down in a heap. The second-place one tripped over him. Suddenly everything had changed. Heller was in second place, straining for the lead.

"Atta boy," shouted Crash, pounding Whisky John's arm some more. "You can do it."

They were lumbering down the home stretch now, neck and, er, neck, their bodies swaying with each ponderous step.

"Don't fall down, Heller. Don't fall down!" Crash's heart was pounding furiously. So was his hand and Whisky John's arm was getting mighty sore.

As they approached the checkered flag, Heller was a tusk behind and giving it all he had. Just before the finish line, however, a gleam came into those eyes that had been dull so many years. Something stirred deep in the beast's massive chest. *Pride! Glory!* He straightened his bent back. He rose up on his crippled legs. He gave a mighty leap forward. *Victory!*

Crash about died.

Two hundred to one. He was already spending his money. Whisky John's arm felt like a chinaberry tree hosting a woodpecker convention.

They went to collect the money. Whisky John did the talking. They handed him a large paper bag full of cred-slips and a huge coil of rope. Whisky John looked pale.

"I swear Crash, I didn't know." He had sick written all over his face.

"Know what? That's the money, right?"

"Right. One hundred thousand creds. It's all here. But I swear I didn't know, honest."

"We got the money, so what's to worry about? Let's go."

"It's not that easy, Crash."

"What do you mean? We just walk out and it's party time."

"See this rope, Crash?"

"Yeah. Nice rope. Let's go."

"This rope is for your behemoth."

"My what?"

"Your behemoth. Heller. He's yours. It was a claims race—I swear I didn't know—you just won the money and the behemoth, every metric ton of him."

"I won't do it. I'll leave him. Let's go." Crash was having none of this. He wanted to start spending his money.

"You can't just abandon him, Crash. He belongs to you now, at least as far as the Dimians see it. They won't stand for it. Behemoth racing is part of their religion and they take it seriously. If you dump Heller they'll kill you."

"Kill me?"

"Tear you limb from limb."

Gulp. Crash could see this was a serious matter. They walked over to the paddock area where several Dimians were washing down the behemoths with large hoses.

"I guess I could race him some more," said Crash doubtfully. "He probably has a few laps left in him. Maybe even make some money out of it."

"That's it, Crash. Hey, I'll be running along."

"You stay right here."

They looked up at Heller. He was panting at a ferocious rate. He looked terrible close up.

"What does he eat?"

"Volmer sprouts. Only the tender ones. About 10 kilos a day."

"Expensive?"

Whisky John nodded.

"Maybe I can sell him."

"That's it. Sell him. Good idea. I guess I'll be—"

Crash froze him with a stare.

"He doesn't look all that bad," lied Crash, trying to make the best out of a rotten situation. He walked towards the towering beast. "Probably lots of people out there would want a winner like him." He stood directly under Heller, looked up at his chin.

"Don't touch him!" cried Whisky John.

Crash patted Heller's massive toe, looked back over his shoulder. "What?" he asked.

Too late.

Heller rolled his eyes and swished his tail. He moaned with the sound of a thousand breaking hearts.

"Oh Lord," said Whisky John. "Now you've done it. A Love Bond."

"A what?" Heller leaned down and licked Crash on the side of his head. It sent him reeling.

"If you touch a behemoth they fall in love with you. Instantly and forever. It's called a Love Bond and there's no getting out of it. It's the peak of the Dimian's religious experience. If you tried to sell him now . . ."

"I know, they'd kill me."

"Limb from limb," added Whisky John with a serious shake of his head. "You are stuck for life."

Crash could see that Heller loved him. Love just oozed from every pore on the poor animal's massive body. He rolled his eyes with love. He waved his trunk with love. He made soul-wrenching groans of love. It was a pitiful sight. Crash felt sorry for the beast.

"He is kinda cute, at that," said Crash. "A

fella could get to like him."

They tied the rope around Heller's neck and led him away. The rope was unnecessary, he followed Crash like a giant puppy dog.

Unfortunately, he made a very clumsy puppy dog. He stepped on a grocery wagon, squashed it flat. Crash dug a handful of creds out of the paper bag. He sideswiped an aircar. Crash dug into the bag. He wiped out ten light poles and three traffic lights. Crash dug into his bag and led him out of town.

On the edge of the desert, out of harm's way, Crash sat on a rock and surveyed the problem. He still had a lot of money. Money could simplify any situation. He was beginning to like Heller.

"You know," he said to the behemoth, "you and I could go places together. Do things."

He sat on the rock and talked to Heller for hours, making plans for the future, spinning dream castles that involved lots of Volmer sprouts and won races. Whisky John counted the money out into little piles on the sand. Heller stood and wheezed a lot. The sun fell low on the horizon.

So total was Heller's love for Crash that it must have been contagious. Or maybe it was the wine Crash was drinking. Anyway, the spacer was so overcome by emotion that he climbed a tree and gave Heller a kiss on the nose.

It was too much for poor old Heller. His heart couldn't stand so much happiness. He smiled a huge lovesick grin, moaned, and fell over dead.

The ground shook. Crash was heartbroken. He had come to love Heller nearly as much as Heller had loved him.

"What am I going to do?" cried Crash.

"Bury him."

"How am I going to go on without him?"

wailed Crash.

"You got to bury him," said Whisky John, taking a slash at the wine bottle. "All very clear."

"What's very clear?" asked Crash, casting a suspicious eye towards the other man.

"It's all Love Bond ritual. Has to be done a certain way. You dig the hole—nobody can help you, got to do it yourself—right where he died. Then you got to get their magical men to come and do their stuff. They you got to put up a monument, has to be a big one, too. No skimping."

"Sounds expensive."

"A Love Bond is no simple thing."

"How much?"

"See that pile of money there?" He pointed to the rest of the winnings and Crash nodded.

"Kiss it goodbye."

"No way out?"

"They'd—"

"I know. Limb from limb. Hole alone'll take me a week to dig."

It took two.

Crash lifted off from Dimian broke as a clam. He ate peanut butter crackers for a long, long time.

"That's how it went," said Crash, setting his empty glass in front of the robot bartender. It was his tenth empty glass. "Learned my lesson." He shook a bent smoke from the crushed pack in his pocket.

The bartender whirled sympathetically. This was one hard luck spacer. He wiped the counter with the bar rag. Crash got shakily to his feet, headed for the exit.

He paused at the door, turned towards the bartender. "That was the fifth race, you said, wasn't it?"

The robot nodded. Good odds, too.



SECOND COMING

by L. E. Modesitt, Jr.

illustrated by Freff

*On the planet called I Found It!,
Jimjoy Wright was not exactly the
ordinary spacebum that he seemed to be.*

Jimjoy Wright finished topping off the jumper's auxiliary tanks. He stowed the hose back in the service pit and slid the cover back into place. It fit flush with the green tarmac. The Believers kept things tidy.

He finished the exterior preflight. Then he tugged at the corner of his left eyelid and felt the miniscanner click on. The "click" was mostly psychological, but necessary. He "clicked" it off.

After a quick look across the field at the slender dispatch tower, he circled back to the right aux fuel tank. He inspected the quick release bolts, the wiring, and the separation charges. He walked back around the armaglass canopy to the left aux tank. The jettison systems on both pod tanks seemed ready. He checked the intakes on the dash jet pods. Clear.

Jimjoy climbed into the left-hand seat. The right seat and the passenger compartment were empty. He tapped his fingers on the padded shield above the instruments, then keyed the dispatcher.

"Jumper seven, ready for passenger."

"Mr. Wright, the passenger is en route." The voice was polite, marginally so.

After two weeks, Jimjoy still hadn't met the woman behind the polite voice. He looked at the late afternoon sun above the Plateau, then back at the instruments. He suppressed a sigh. The whole thing was so iffy. If only the Believers weren't so stiff-necked... if only the Fuards weren't up to something... if only the Terrans weren't so chicken....

He stared blankly through the armaglass canopy, not really seeing the green and white squares of the small jumpport. Stocky, tanned, brown haired—with all of his suppressed energy, he still felt relaxed compared to the religious intensity of the tall, light-skinned Believers.

A green electrocar pulled up at the edge of the field. A slender woman in white got out.



She walked quickly across the empty field to the jumper, untouched by the slight breeze blowing toward the Plateau.

Jimjoy scratched behind his right shoulder and at the itching skin around the underarm signal implant. He checked the position of the late afternoon sun again, looked at his watch, and began the checklist. He missed the automated crosscheck equipment. The Believers liked to keep things simple as well as tidy.

"Believer Wright?" the woman asked as she climbed into the front passenger seat. Here it was a passenger seat. In the Service it was the copilot's seat.

"Nope, just plain old Jimjoy Wright."

The tip of her lightly tanned nose wrinkled slightly.

"I had thought . . ."

"I know, Miss—uh—Doctor, but I'm the only jumper round here at the moment. The others are all ferrying the high muckedy-mucks up to the Plateau for the ceremony."

"Day of Celebration. My name is Believer Alba. Dr. Alba, if you wish. I need to see a patient at Jehosephat."

Jimjoy finished the checklist.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd strap in, Miss—uh—Dr. Alba." He keyed the dispatcher.

"Seven, preparing to lift."

"Cleared to lift for Jehosephat, Seven."

Dr. Alba wrinkled her nose again, pushed a strand of fine blonde hair back into perfect place over her right ear, and snapped the safety harness into place with the ease and force of habit.

"Why aren't you up at First Landing?" asked Jimjoy with a nod at the Plateau. He activated the automatic cabin locks and made a last fuel check. "Seems like everyone else on *I Found It!* is."

The muted grumbling of the thrusters as they caught drowned out the beginning of her statement.

"... as an apprentice physician, I must take my turn at tending those who cannot be at the Celebration."

"What happens if your God appears at the Celebration?" asked Jimjoy. He tried to keep the grin out of his voice.

"It is written that He will, and He will reward all true Believers according to their just deserts, whether they are at the Celebration or not."

"Wasn't He supposed to have His Second Coming over 20 years ago tonight?"

Jimjoy checked the rotor extension and watched the blade arc as he fed in thruster

torque. The implant itch was killing him, but he avoided the urge to scratch. A doctor just might guess. He kept his eyes shifting between the field and the gauges.

"How did you come here?" she asked, avoiding his last question.

"By freighter."

"But why? You are not a Believer."

After balancing the torques he finished the checklist. The jumper lifted, hovering on its ground cushion in the green afternoon light. The hover felt heavier than normal with the full aux tanks, but the jumper still had plenty of power to spare.

Jimjoy edged the stick forward. The jumper began to climb as the airspeed built. After he cleared the edge of the jumpport, he banked into a gentle turn toward Jehosephat—down the Great Valley from the Plateau.

"Well," he began, as if the question had been posed only seconds ago, "I got tired of punching buttons on Old Earth, didn't like the prissy cities of New Terra, didn't like roughing it on Pristina, and I didn't like the Fuardians with their nasty little conflicts and their tin-horn dictator. This is as far as I got with the credits I had. Latched on here a couple of weeks ago as a relief pilot for nights, times when you Believers are at services, what have you."

He eased the jumper from the turn onto a level heading parallel to the Plateau—even as the jumper entered the shadow of the big mesa. He twisted the thrusters up fractionally for a gentle climb. If only he knew what to expect—but his instructions had been none too explicit. They couldn't be, not if his actions were to be impartial enough. Just be close to First Landing in case something happens at the celebration. Do what's necessary. Great! Just great.

He looked over at the woman momentarily. Clean featured, piercing green eyes, sharp nose. He turned back to the panel quickly.

"Hey," he began awkwardly, "is it really true that you believe your God will come back at sunset today . . . or next year . . . or the year after . . . I mean, on the anniversary of today?"

"Of course." The doctor's voice was gentle.

Jimjoy twisted the thruster grip throttle back enough to kill the climb. He had a clear enough view of all the Plateau. He pointed. "There. You can see the temple and the crowd." He paused. "Why is that half of the Plateau empty?"

"That's God's half . . . where He will manifest Himself. Both real and symbolic. God must be

half you, and you half God. Actually it's more complicated than that." She looked out through the armaglass canopy to signal an end to that theological inquiry.

Jimjoy shook his head. The things some intelligent people believed. *I Found It!* was such a contradiction. Agricultural, but based on a solid and dispersed technology; libertarian civil government, but a fanatical religious social structure; highly educated population, but one believing in a simplistic religion.

He peered up the valley at Jehosephat—another half hour—theoretically. Say about ten minutes after sunset.

A glint high in the sky, almost over the point of the setting sun, caught his eye. Then it vanished. A ship coming in? Certainly not a scheduled one, nor a free trader. Not today. Besides, he'd checked the schedule before they'd left Second Landing.

Not many ships called at *I Found It!*, he knew. Both the Believers and the Fuardians discouraged idle sightseeing. And being on the far side of the trade lanes with the Fuardian Conglomerate in between didn't help either. The Fuardians were beginning to rattle their sabres, looking for an easy kill. The Believers of *I Found It!*, while not pacifists, relied heavily on their God for defense.

"Where did you learn to pilot a jumper?" asked Dr. Alba. "We don't trust any spacebum with them."

"Academy," he muttered.

"And you're here?"

"Don't hold much for pomp and ceremony," he answered, realizing the ridiculousness of the answer as he said it. He rushed on, "I mean, here you let a man live as he wants to. You may pity us slobs who don't Believe. But so long as I do a good day's work, no one seems to mind—except on Holy Days," he added with a grin.

"I'd think a military pilot would be more welcome with the Fuardians, or the Neo-Macedonians . . . or even old Earth."

He shook his head again, fighting the urge to scratch the underarm implant. He looked for the tell-tale glint against the sky, then throttled back the thrusters.

"Fuardians'll fight if they have to, but they'd rather break your spirit or try some neat form of genocide rather than bust up a pretty planet. The sneakier the better is a pretty fair approximation of the going Fuardian motto." He looked at the sky above the dropping sun. Still nothing. "Now the Macedonians have one of the oldest colonies and a real population

problem. That makes for cannon fodder. And old Earth is a mess. You can't cross a single blockline without your authorization card."

"And still you don't believe in the providence of God?" questioned the young doctor, with a sweep of her arm across the green and blue checkerboard lands of the Great Valley.

"No offense, Doctor, but I think anybody believes in more than man is in for an awful shock. Any god man can think up, man can destroy. We're better off without."

He wondered if he'd said too much.

"You're no ordinary spacebum."

"No spacebum is ordinary." He'd said too much. He checked his watch. Still about fifteen minutes or so till twilight. He eased back the thrusters even further. The jumper was still cruising on course toward Jehosephat. He tightened the pilot's harness. Not military, but it would have to do.

"You know," he began conversationally, "I wonder what would happen if your God actually showed up."

"He will, one Day of Celebration. We will rejoice and prepare Him welcome."

Jimjoy looked at the sky over the Plateau, then down at nine-tenths of the population of *I Found It!* gathered in the Great Square to await the Second Coming—as they presumably had every year for the past twenty.

He felt the internal trigger from the underarm implant. He reached up and tugged the corner of his left eyelid and triggered the miniscanner, hoping it wasn't a false alarm. Then he banked the jumper toward the Great Square on the Plateau.

"Pilot! Jehosephat is *that* way."

So damned little time. Why just one person? Why me? He knew the answer, but it made him feel better to throw in a little self-pity.

Dr. Alba touched his right shoulder.

"Did you hear me? I have a patient at Jehosephat."

The jumper shook with the thunderclap that radiated from the Plateau. Even over the thrusters, Jimjoy could clearly hear the long echoing note of the trumpet. Wondering how they managed that, he steepened the bank, forcing the jumper back toward the Plateau.

As the jumper levelled out, Dr. Alba paled. Even Jimjoy flinched.

Standing in the middle of the "God side" of the Plateau of First Landing was the towering figure of an angel, golden-haired, standing literally two kilometers into the deepening green sky and lowering a trumpet.

"Oh, my God," whispered the young doctor

as she made the sign of the Holy Triad.

"Exactly," muttered Jimjoy. "The bastards, the total bastards." He lowered the nose. Dr. Alba was sitting forward in the passenger seat, her eyes locked on the magnificent figure.

"The Holy Messenger," she murmured. "But I didn't really Believe. Forgive me, oh My God, forgive me my sins of disbelief."

Jimjoy lined up the jumper on the left knee of the angel. From here, he'd pass over one corner of the crowd, but he didn't have time for a longer route. The angel was holding a set of balance pans in one hand and a sword of fire in the other. It was going to be as quick and as dirty a job as they could manage.

Jimjoy leaned toward Dr. Alba and slammed her back into the seat with his right arm. He triggered the emergency override to activate the full passenger restraint system, then twisted the grip throttle through the detent all the way to emergency. Then he lowered the nose further to compensate for the increased power.

What a half-assed way to fight a war! I hope the scanner gets it all.

He kept the forward pressure on the stick as the airspeed needle climbed, the intakes screamed, and blades began to shudder. He eased the stick back slightly as the rotors approached blade stall, cutting in the full pod thrust, disengaging the blades, and folding them with the emergency system.

He hoped it worked. He might need them on the way back—if there was a way back.

He looked at the angel dramatically lifting the balance pans into the twilight. Somehow the angle seemed wrong. The angel blurred momentarily as the jumper crossed the edge of the Plateau.

Jimjoy flicked the communit selector to fullband guard.

He could sense Dr. Alba struggling against the restraint system as the jumper bored in on the towering angel. He forced himself to keep his eyes open.

He fed more power to the straining thrusters and pods by cracking open the emergency manual fuel system. Three red lights glared from the console, and the EGT marched into the red.

Hell, I won't have an exhaust system left.

He felt the throttle coming back, out of habit, caught himself, and laughed, jamming the grip back full over. The jumper bucked with the power change. Even with the blades folded in the dash configuration he could feel the instability.

Now they were inside the shadow of the to-

wering figure. The angel appeared less clear. Jimjoy squinted at the robe-covered legs.

If it was a cruiser, he'd had it. But the intelligraphs had insisted that a destroyer or a corvette would be the most he could expect on a mission like this. Neither had the power for full screens.

Range guides—check.

He dumped the nose toward the angel's robed ankles.

The image broke. The God side of the Plateau was clear except for the spiral curves of the Fuardian destroyer. Jimjoy saw Believers breaking ranks and running for cover. He looked at them long enough to be sure the scanner implant got it all.

Great. If he failed, between the scanner and the survivors, there'd be evidence enough to tie the Fuards to the whole mess. Nothing short of point nihil would destroy the scanner. Unfortunately, the bearer of the infernal eye was less invulnerable.

He flipped the jumper down and right, abruptly up and left, in time to avoid the first burst from the boltguns and the lasers.

"Fuardian war-destroyer at First Landing!



Fuardian war-destroyer at First Landing! Firing on civilians! I repeat. Hostile Fuardian action against civilians."

That would have to do. He hoped someone was monitoring guard, but more important, it would be recorded. Everything for the record.

Jimjoy cut the pod thrusts and jammed the nose down and hard left into a six gee turn. Then he added back the full pod thrust and leveled out four feet above the Plateau still screaming toward the destroyer.

If this were only like practice—but it's a real hit and miss operation. The only question is who's hitting first.

A chunk of the armaglass canopy went as Jimjoy jerked the jumper to the left and then back on course. The lasers were all swinging in on his flight path like the angel's sword they might have been. He checked the range again. It would have to do.

Heading straight at the destroyer, he triggered the shear release bolts on the still-full aux tanks and yanked the jumper into a max gee turn away from the destroyer and toward the nearest edge of the Plateau.

The tanks hit the smooth rock just short of the destroyer and skidded toward the Fuardian ship. Jimjoy lost sight of them as he finished turning tail.

The fire light flashed on the right thruster. The console was largely red lights. Another chunk of the armaglass canopy went with the near miss of a boltgun.

Another mile, just a few seconds—the jumper was kicked from behind by the explosion of the jettisoned tanks. It crabbed violently as the right thruster quit altogether.

Jimjoy cut the pods and the remaining thruster as the jumper plunged out over the edge of the Plateau. He flicked the switches for the emergency rotor deployment system, felt the jumper shudder as the blades spread.

He increased the blade pitch and felt the jumper swing hard right.

Damn! The Fuards had gotten the tail compensator.

The passenger restraints unlocked as the main generator quit. Jimjoy wondered if the doctor would sit still. Last thing he needed now was interference.

He scanned the checkerboard of field and wood. They were on the far side of the Plateau from Second Landing, thank God. His reception there might be all right in a few months,

but not tonight or tomorrow... not that he intended to be around tomorrow.

From a wisp of smoke in the distance, he made a guess at the wind direction and swung the jumper around. The doctor was turning whiter as she watched the jumper plummet silently toward the ground below.

Jimjoy's hands were wet. The late twilight made distance judging hard. His eyes flicked from the altimeter to the horizon to the ground in a continuing pattern.

Just as the jumper reached bush-top height on his path through the blue-green pasture, Jimjoy twisted full pitch on the rotors. The jumper slowed and then mushed into the grass.

He fought to keep it upright until the blades dropped within brake range. Then he jammed on the rotor brake. As the blades shuddered to a halt, the jumper tipped slowly and came to rest on the edge of the right tip blade.

Jimjoy went through the shut-down checklist methodically. He thumbprinted the seals and sat, shaking. Dr. Alba climbed out without a word or a look at the pilot and walked halfway across the field, looking up at the Plateau.

After a few minutes, Jimjoy followed. There was a thin line of greasy smoke rising above the Plateau. As he watched, the battered Fuardian destroyer lifted slowly on gravs, winking into the black-green sky.

He sighed. Somehow, the aux tanks had done enough damage. The Fuards didn't have the power to maintain distorters or screens. He wondered how many on the Plateau were dead.

"Praise be to God," intoned Dr. Alba, facing the Plateau and making the sign of the Holy Triad.

Right, thought Captain Jimjoy Wright, right. He walked quickly up the dirt road away from the burned-out jumper. As he covered the ground, he triggered the underarm implant. The recovery flitter would find him soon enough. Back at Farlung they'd remove the scanner unit, with its sealed proof seal, forward it to the Federation and the Guard, and wait. And if they were lucky, the Fleet would conduct maneuvers at the edge of the Fuardian Conglomerate, almost clobber an unlucky planet, and the Fuards would apologize—maybe.

What a hell of a way to fight a war.

He kept walking.



STARSCHOOL

by Joe Haldeman & Jack C. Haldeman II

illustrated by George Barr

I.

I guess he thought he looked frightening. Loincloth, beads, and all.

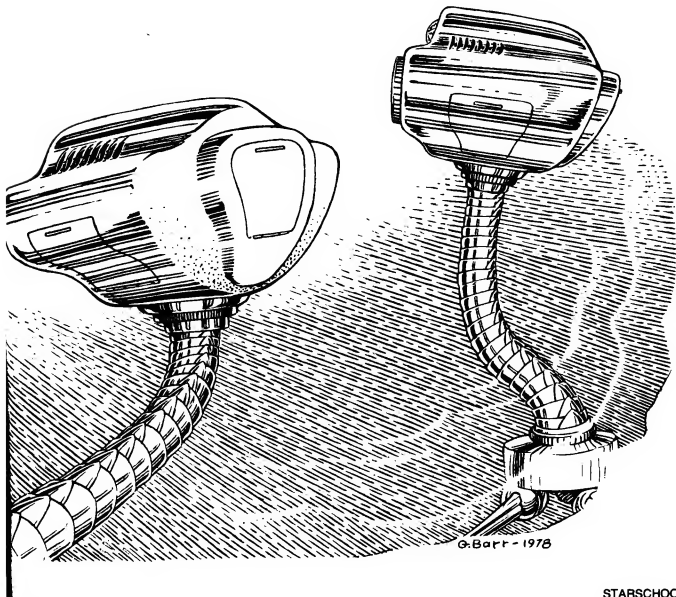
"Are you going to fight, or just stand there with your mouth open?"

I didn't know my mouth was open. I shut it. "Mr. B'oosa, I can't fight you. I outweigh you by a hundred pounds, and besides—"

"Besides, you're a hardy Springworld Pio-

neer? And I'm just a rich man's son? You might also add that you're a head taller and five years younger than I—that's what you were thinking of, right? I assure you the fight will be more than fair . . . with these." He was holding two hollow shafts of aluminum a couple of meters long.

When you're a giant constantly walking around pygmies, you learn to hold your tongue or be branded a bully. A reputation like that





can make a ship even as large as this one seem like a pretty small place. I clamped my jaw shut and felt my ears get red.

A crowd was gathering around us. It was between classes and *Starschool's* high-gravity gym was packed with students trying to get in shape for the upcoming planetfall. Seemed like most of them were drifting our way.

"Come on, Carl. Never the wrong time to teach a *ricón* a lesson." That was my friend, Will Kramer, another scholarship boy. Some friend. The last time I listened to him I ended up with a pile of detention slips. Took me a week to work them off.

I took one of the staffs from B'ooosa—excuse me, Mr., repeat, Mr. B'ooosa—and tested it. It twisted easily and I bent it back into shape. "No deal, sir. A Springer fights fairly or not at all." I could tie the damn thing around his neck. I tried to hand it back to him, but he didn't make a move for it.

"An impressive display of brute strength, Carl." He flipped his staff easily from hand to hand. "But strength counts for very little when fencing with the quarterstaff. The challenge stands."

"Perhaps if you'd tell me why you're

challenging me out of the clear black nowhere—maybe then I'd consent to fight. I can't see that I have any quarrel with you." No real quarrel with him personally—but the way the *ricónes* had made our lives miserable the past couple of years, I'm always happy to see any of them taken down a bit.

"Don't misunderstand me, Carl. This isn't a personal duel or anything like that. I just want to settle a wager—one of my colleagues,"—his colleagues!—"Mr. Freeman, believes that I can best him at the quarterstaff mainly by virtue of my longer arms and greater strength. I contend that skill, only skill, determines the winner. Surely, if I can beat you, strength and size mean little."

"Just how much did you bet on this little wager?"

He shrugged. "Five thousand."

My father once made four thousand pesas on a crop several years ago. It was a very good crop, one of the best Springworld's seen. It nearly killed him. "You have a fight, then—but be ready to lose more than a few pesas. Teeth, for instance."

"You don't frighten me, Springer. Where would you like to have the match?"

"Somewhere it'll be easy to clean up the blood. Right here is all right with me, if these people will clear away."

The crowd around us scrambled back, making a rough circle ten or twelve meters in diameter. Didn't look like much room to me, but Mr. B'ooosa nodded and stepped to the other side of the circle.

I took the staff by one end and swung it back and forth in an arc, fast, about the level of Mr. B'ooosa's head. It made a sharp whipping sound, like a spear going through the air.

"If this were made of iron, you'd be a dead man, Sir."

"It isn't and I won't be. Take your guard."

"My 'guard'?"

"Take your guard. Must you have *everything* explained to you? Prepare to defend yourself. Like this." He spread his feet and held the staff at a slight angle in front of his body, using it as a shield. I recognized the position from having watched these matches before. I'd never been in one, of course. Springers have too many important things to do rather than waste time battering each other with sticks.

He started to advance on me, walking kind of like a crab. I almost smiled. He really looked silly, vulnerable; wearing just that ridiculous loincloth and, though tall for a non-Springer, awfully skinny. No chest to speak of.

I walked toward him, too, looking for a

target. Should go for the groin, but hell, I didn't want to *kill* the little guy.

He danced in and *crack!* rapped my knuckles so hard I dropped the pole. Reached down to pick it up and he banged me a good backhand to the top of my skull. I shook my head to clear the dizziness, scooped up the staff and drove straight for his solar plexus. He tapped it aside easily with one end of his staff and the other end whistled around to the side of my head—

I woke up lying in my bunk with a coldpack strapped over my left temple. I sat up and, man, fireballs started to tear my head apart.

"Are you all right, Carl?" It was Alegria, a pretty little girl from Selva.

"Sure, just fine. Great. Nothing like a little workout." I swung my feet down to the floor and blocked out the light with one hand. "How long have I been out?"

"All night and half the morning. You came out of it before we got you to the infirmary"—yeah, I could remember that, barely—"but the medic gave you a pill and you were out again, so we carted you back down here. You weigh a ton."

"162 kilograms, anyhow." It's not true that I'm sensitive about my weight. People are always exaggerating.

"In case you're interested, you don't have a concussion or anything."

"Feels like I've got concussions to spare. Be glad to share 'em with that little son—"

"Hush, Carl. The dean thinks it was an accident."

"Accident? Why should I cover up for that *ricón*—"

"Think straight, you big farmer. We aren't covering for *him*!"

Of course . . . giant Springer bully picking on . . . oh, Christ. I leaned back on the pillow. Gently.

"You missed three classes, last night and today. I put your assignments on the table there."

"Thanks, Alegria, you're sweet." A pity she wasn't about three feet taller. I felt her tiny hand on my forehead and opened my eyes again, just a squint.

"Want me to get you some wake-up pills? You've got to get your classwork done before we get to Earth." Otherwise they keep you in quarantine until you catch up academically. "You don't want to miss part of the tour."

Far as I was concerned, Earth could go to Hell. "How long before we get there?"

"Less than three days and you've got four day's work. Pills?"

"Just some analgesics."

"On the table, next to your books." The bed creaked a little when she got up and I heard the door slide open. "Study hard, Carl." Then she was gone. I took the headache pills, then lay on the bunk another ten minutes, feeling miserable, before I got up and looked at the books. All of them Earth history, geophysics, customs and so on—not exactly a joy to read even if they were in English. But of course, most of them were in Spanish and Pan-swahili, both of which I should know better than I do. There's only one planet in the Confederación where the native language is English. Springworld, the only planet so harsh they had to colonize it with giants.

If she were only three feet taller.

My head was still aching when they parked *Starschool* in orbit next to Earth's Customs Satellite. All spindly and spider-like, the starship-university is great for punching holes through space, but it isn't equipped for landing on planets at all. The lightest gravity would cause crushing torques, tear it apart. We always orbit planets and shuttle down. But first we have to go through the red tape. There's always lots of red tape.

First a team of Earthie doctors came over to *Starschool* and poked and prodded us to make sure we weren't bringing any nasty alien bugs down to their precious planet. Then we had to fill out a lot of forms. I got writer's cramp from signing my name so many times. Finally we transferred over to the Customs Satellite and stood for a long time in two lines. The line I was in was for everybody who weighed over 75 kilograms. It was a short line.

The dean, Dr. M'bisá, walked over. He was arguing with a little Earthie in a light blue uniform.

"We signed a contract, Mr. Pope-Smythe, a legal contract that said *nothing* about this idiotic tax! It guaranteed all of our expenses while—"

"Please, Professor. I didn't say there was anything wrong with your contract. But that's strictly between you and Earth Tours, Limited. None of our business at all. Perhaps you can get them to reimburse you . . . but there's no way any of your students can be allowed to make planetfall until every overweight person has paid the Extraweight Alien Tax."

"You know as well as I do that Earth Tours will never—"

"Again, Professor, that's *your* problem. My problem is that all of these people have to pay the Extraweight before I can go to lunch. The tax probably isn't covered in your contract

because it wasn't in effect until last Avril—but you still have to pay it; the Alianza's laws don't make exceptions for agreements between private, profit-making organizations. Besides, the tax isn't that much—only ten or twenty pesas for all but a couple of these people."

"And for them?"

"Well, it goes up quite a bit for those over ninety kilos. How much do you weigh, son?" He was talking to me.

"162 kilograms." All of it muscle, too.

"That much? Oh, dear. Let me see." He rifled through the tables in the back of a pamphlet. "That would come to P16,800."

The dean exploded. "That's outrageous!"

"It's the law." Mr. Pope-Smythe shrugged and held the pamphlet out for him to see.

"Oh, I believe you." He waved the book away. Then he snatched it back and checked the figures.

"Dr. M'bisa," I said, "I don't want to go to Earth that badly. Not P17,000 worth." P17,000! A small fortune on Springworld. A man was lucky if he could pull P2000 a year from that barren ground and hostile environment. All this just for 'cultural enrichment' on some backwater planet called Earth. I'd rather pass it up.

"Nonsense, Carl. The student expense fund will take care of everybody's tax, including yours. It just means we won't have quite as much spending money on the next planet. That's all right, not much to buy on Hell, anyway."

Somehow it sounded all right when the dean said it. But after everybody got weighed, all but one of the others was under ninety kilos. Their *total* tax was P1130, not even a tenth of mine. The only other one over 90 was Mr. B'ooosa, who had to pay P1900. He just whipped out his checkbook and paid it himself. Hell, why not? He had five thousand extra for knocking me flat the other day.

The total tax took over half of what was left in the student expense fund. That made me one real popular fellow, having accounted for more than nine-tenths of it. Being a scholarship kid didn't help either; no way in the universe I could have paid it myself.

Piling insult on insult, they organized us alphabetically for the Tour, in groups of three. I had to share rooms with good old Mr. B'ooosa and another *ricón* by name of Francisco Bolívar. I could tell it was going to be a long Tour.

But even before we got on the shuttle down to Earth's only spaceport, Chimborazo Interplanetary, I had figured out a plan. A simple

plan.

I hoped.

By the same genetic engineering that made me a giant, all Earthies were midgets—nobody weighed more than 40 kilograms.

Somewhere on this beat-up planet there had to be a job—a high paying job—that called for a man, a boy if you want to get technical about it, who weighed more than four Earthies and stood two and a half meters tall. I swore I would earn back that P16,800, every pesa of it. And get off everybody's list.

II.

Chimbarazo Interplanetary was just another spaceport. It was big, but who's ever seen a small one? We had a half-hour to kill before getting on the Tour flyer, so I found the nearest newsprojector, slid a demipesa into the slot and pushed the button marked "English".

"Section, please," the machine said.

"Let me have the wannads section," I said.

"Wannads? Query? We have no wannads section."

What did they call wannads on Earth? Wish I'd hit the books a little harder those last three days. "How about jobs?"

"How about jobs?" it echoed. Goddamn dumb machine.

"Do you have a 'jobs' section?"

"Jobs? Query? We have no jobs section."

Employment. "Do you have an 'employment' section?"

"Yes, we have an employment section." *Click.*

"Your time has expired. Please deposit two demipesas."

"But I already paid, you stupid—"

Click.

I gave up and slipped it another two demis. A list of jobs came on the screen. Turning a knob, I started to scan them.

It didn't look very promising.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Chimbarazo - Macro-BA Area

ABSTRACOTYPIST, senior, 30K, gd wrk cond, 314-90343-098367.

ACETOGRAPHER, degr only, 12K, 547-23902-859430.

ACTOR, sal var, feelie-sens, exp only, no minors, 254-34290-534265.

AEROSPACE ENG, PhD only, 38K, cisplan enviro spec pref, Lun office, 452-78335-973489.

... and so on. Didn't know what half of them meant. I must have scanned a hundred before one caught my eye:

GLADIATORS, prizes to 20K, taxfree, esp vibroclub. 8 indiv, 75 team openings. Some animal work. 738-49380-720843.

I wrote down the number and ran to the flyer, just barely making it in time. The dean scowled at me as I strapped myself in. On our way to the art museum in Macro-Buenosaires, I studied the city map and found a large arena, not far from the museum. As soon as the Tour landed, I slipped away. So much for culture, I had work to do.

I'd seen a couple of gladiatorial matches before; not on Springworld, of course, but places like Selva and Nurhodesia, where they don't have to fight the planet so much, they often fight each other in the arena. On Earth it turned out to be quite different, and even more popular.

I bought the cheapest ticket and found my way to a bleacher area. Everybody was cheering and yelling at once; a solid roar like thunder-surf. Hard to see what they were so excited about. Two men were slugging it out down in the arena, but from the bleachers you could hardly tell what they were doing. I rented a scope from a robot vendor.

Don't think either of them were Earthies. One was tall and black like B'oosa, probably a Nurhodesian. The other was tan and shorter, but seemed to have a weight advantage. They were fighting with short clubs, each with his left hand taped behind his back. It was exciting, and looked kind of hard; lots of fancy footwork and dodging back and forth.

After a few minutes the short guy hit the tall one a solid blow to the throat, knocking him down. A white-suited man ran out and looked at the one who had fallen. Then he made some signals to the crowd, waving his arms in wide circles. When the black guy tried to get back up, he pushed him back down again, not too gently. The crowd was going insane. It was pretty obvious the guy in white was some kind of a referee, and he'd just declared the short guy to be the winner. A couple of boys with a stretcher came out and tried to carry the loser away. He pushed them aside and limped off by himself, rubbing his throat.

I turned to the man sitting next to me and tapped him on the shoulder. He looked at me and jumped, *really* jumped—must have had his eyes fastened on the fight the whole time and not noticed a giant sitting next to him.

"Pardon me for surprising you," I said in bad Spanish, "but I am a stranger here and am in need of some information."

"You certainly are a stranger," he said with a laugh. "Don't think I have ever seen anyone stranger." I think that was a pun in Spanish. "What would you like to know?"

"How much did that little fellow just win?"

"Little?" He looked me up and down, shook his head. "I guess he is little, to you. He just took the heavyweight club—vibroclub—championship of Macro-BA. Twenty-five thousand pesos."

"Sounds like easy money."

He laughed again. "No, sir. For every one who even gets within reach of the championship, many dozens go *perdid*."

"*Perdid*? What's that?"

"A gladiator who can't fight any more. Sometimes because he's wounded too badly and has to retire. Sometimes because the fear grabs his heart and he can't face the ring. Sometimes because he's dead."

"They let people die?" Oh boy, they hadn't said anything about *this* in the textbooks.

"Not 'let', sir. All gladiators are supposed to be friends, and who would kill a friend? But nevertheless, it happens. It is considered bad, bad form." He turned back to watch the ring.

A man in formal clothes handed the winner a piece of paper, probably a check. He held it up high and strutted around the arena. The crowd roared, about half of them cheering and the rest booing or hissing.

"Where's that guy from? He looks too big to be an Earth... Earthman."

"He's from Hell. Most of the heavyweights are. Mean bastards. Get some heavyweights from Nurhodesia—like his last opponent—and some from Perrin or Selva, occasionally Dimian. Never saw one as big as you, though. You a Springer?"

"Yeah. Would I fight in their class?"

He laughed again. "There isn't any heavier. You have fights on Springworld?"

"No. Never saw one until we visited Selva."

"Then don't even think about it, friend. Go up against a Heller and you'd be *perdid* in three seconds. They're trained from birth to maim and kill."

"Springworld's no vacation spot. I think I could take one on."

He shrugged. "Don't set too much store in your size and strength, sir. The big ones fall, too. Training is everything."

I remembered how B'oosa had knocked me senseless. "I suppose you're right. But I could learn. Where would one go to learn more

about the fights?"

"Well, there's an information office beneath the box seats over there. But if you really want to see what's what, go to the Plaza de Gladiadores. That's where the fighters are."

"Far from here?"

"No, it's inside the city. About two hundred kilometers north."

I watched one more match, a quarterstaff duel—really felt for the guy who lost—then took the underground express to the Plaza de Gladiadores. It was a large square, very pretty in the afternoon sunshine, full of trees and bright flowers. All around the edge of the square were taverns full of people, many crowded around outside tables talking loudly under the awnings. Bands of musicians roamed from tavern to tavern, strumming on guitars and tooting horns, trying to drown each other out. Sounded pretty confusing at first, but after I got into the swing of things it seemed to fit together nicely.

I walked to the nearest tavern and walked inside. Practically had to bend over double to get through the low door. People were talking and laughing loudly, but they stopped when I crawled through the entrance. By the time I found a table they had rightly sized me up as a tourist and were loudly ignoring me again.

The chair was too tiny and too low, so I dusted off a piece of floor and sat down.

I ordered *cerveza preparada*—beer with lime—and when it came, two men walked over to my table. I was having some trouble figuring out which of the crowd were tourists and which were gladiators, but at least one of these guys had to be a fighter. One was obviously an Earthie, short and slim but muscular, wearing a white jump-suit so tight it looked like he'd just been dipped in a vat of plastic and left to dry. The other, the fighter, was a little too tall and heavy to be an Earthie. His face was horribly scarred, three puckered lines going from his forehead to chin. Most of his nose was missing and the scars pulled down his eyelids to give him a permanent wide-eyed stare. He spoke first, in English.

"Mind if me and my friend join ya?" He didn't wait for an answer, just hooked his foot around a chair, pulled it out noisily and sat down. His friend did the same, but without all the commotion.

"How did you know I could speak English?"

"Shize, big as you are, you gotta be a Springer. Springers talk English, don't they?"

Never met a Springer who "talked" English the way he did. We usually save cuss words for

special occasions. But I nodded and asked where he was from.

"New Britain. That's a place on Hell. My friend here's an Earthie—where'd you say you're from, Angelo?"

"Mexico," he said in Spanish, pronouncing the "x" as an "h". "But also I speak English."

"Both of you gladiators?"

"I'm a gladiator," the Heller roared, "Little Angelo here, he's just getting started."

"How do you go about getting started?" I asked Angelo.

He took a sip from the mug of spiced wine he was holding. "First there are many years of schooling. Then you have, what you would say, an apprenticeship; where you fight the animals. If you are good at fighting the animals, you may have luck and be asked to join a team. That is as far as I have gotten; I just joined the Mexico D.F.—in English, uh, you would call it Meck-sico City—quarterstaff team."

"Then, if you're gonna be a *real* gladiator," the Heller butted in, "the crowd's gotta notice you. You gotta stand out. Then ya get offers for two-man matches, an' that's where the real money is."

"How much real money?"

"Smallest prize'd be about five grand, goes up from there. Biggest has to be the Earth Championship, quarter of a million. No tax, either; every pesa free and clear. Any other job, Welfare tax takes ninety-five dightin' pesas from every hundred you earn."

"It is a just tax," said Angelo. "Fair to all."

"Bullshize!" he snorted. "I don't see how you can sit there and take it. Less'n a million workin' people takin' care of billions of lazy dighters."

"It works, *amigo*, it works."

"Sure it does—as long as the guys payin' taxes keep on pluggin' away. What if they all up an' quit? Place'd fall apart. Wouldn't have no offworlders comin' in to take over their jobs." He turned to me, grinned. "'Cept for gladiators. Always be lots of us comin' in for that, long as it keeps payin' them tax-free pesas."

"What about me?"

"You? What about you?"

"I could use some of those tax-free pesas myself. Be a gladiator."

The Heller cackled, then laughed loud and drained his beer mug. He banged it on the table twice. "Sorry, Goliath, wrong ballgame. Angelo was talkin' a lot of bullshize, but one thing he said was right. If you ain't studied for years, you ain't got a chance in the ring. Be *perdid* in a coupla seconds."

"Probably not just wounded," Angelo added, shaking his head. "Dead."

"Damn right. Fighter'd be a fool to give you a chance to get hold of him. Bet you could break a man like he was a stick."

I probably could. "So why do you think I'd get killed right away? Maybe I wouldn't give my opponent the chance. I'm in pretty good shape."

The bartender brought over a pitcher and filled up the Heller's beer mug and mine. He took a sip, held it and studied me over the rim of the mug. "Look, you Springers do arm wrestlin'?"

"You mean 'elbows on the table'?"

"Right." He planted his elbow in front of me, forearm straight up. Muscular, but kind of puny next to a Springer's. "Now I'll bet you this round of beer that I can pin your arm before you can pin mine."

Easy money.

"That's a bet." I put my elbow next to his and he curled his hand around my wrist. I was getting settled to push when his left hand lashed out and I felt the point of a dagger digging into my throat.

"Now you can either go down real gentle or I can cut your throat and just let your arm drop on its own." The bartender stood behind the Heller, grinning. Angelo was smiling gently, looking away. The Heller just stared at me, his expression as cold as the steel of the dagger against my throat. I'd been had.

"You win." I let him pin my arm and tossed the bartender a pesa.

The Heller put the dagger back in its hip-pocket sheath. He leaned back in his chair, grinned. "You look like a pretty smart fella. Get the idea?"

"Yeah. No rules."

"Well, they got rules, but they ain't that strict about enforcin' them, if you know what I mean. And fighters learn lotsa tricks."

I squeezed the last drop of lime into the beer and drank a little. It was bitter and warm. "Still, I may have to do it."

"No dightin' way. They wouldn't let you. Easier ways to commit suicide, anyway."

"But I need money, and fast. Sounds like nobody but gladiators can make any on Earth."

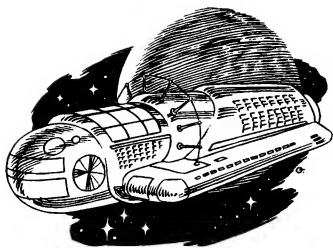
"How much do you need, Springer?" Angelo asked.

"Almost 17,000 pesos. I've got a little over a month to find it."

"There might be a way. . . ."

"What?" Anything.

"Most places have animal fights—you don't have to be a real gladiator and they pay four,



five hundred pesos. Tax free."

"Shize, Angelo, you want to get him killed?"

He shook his head and looked straight at me. "You're almost as big as a bull. You could fight the bulls in Mexico."

"What's a bull?"

"It's a big dightin' animal with horns a mile wide. It'd eatcha for breakfast."

"It also has teeth, then?"

"No, *amigo*, he was joking. Bulls don't bite people. But they can be ferocious animals and their horns are sharp. Still, it would be less dangerous than fighting the gladiators." He scribbled something on a slip of paper and handed it to me.

"Go to the *Plaza de Toros* in Guadalajara and talk to this man. He may be able to arrange some fights for you."

I finished the beer and went back to the underground express. Maybe I should have gone straight to Guadalajara, but I wanted to think about it a little and get a good night's rest. And find out something about bulls.

III.

The Tour was spending the night in the Hotel de la Bahia, a huge old hotel on the harbor, in the middle of downtown Macro-BA. I got my room number from the clerk and took a lifter to the 167th floor. My roommates B'oosa and Bolivar were already there.

"Ah, the peasant returns," said Bolivar. He was standing in front of a mirror, combing his beard. B'oosa was draped over a little couch, reading a tape. He grunted, didn't look up.

"So how was the museum?" I asked.

"Lots of pictures. Fossils. Cultural relics of all sorts. Worth seeing. Where were you all day?"

"Out hunting a job."

"Job-hunting? What do you want with a job?"

"Have to pay back the Extraweight Alien Tax."

"Hell, why bother?" Bolivar slumped into an overstuffed chair. "Nobody else is going to—and you can't help having been born a big ugly monster."

"It's important. To me."

"Besides, what kind of a job can you get on this crazy planet? They're socialized from top to bottom—nobody gets to keep a tenth of what they earn." He grinned. "Except criminals, I guess. You going to—"

"And gladiators," I said.

"Ridiculous," B'ooosa rumbled. "Don't you know they *kill* gladiators here—ignorant savages—and you're going to risk your life just because a few of the other peasants are mad at you?"

"As I say, Mr. B'ooosa, it's important."

"It's ridiculous." He went back to his tape.

"Mr. B'ooosa's right, Carl. It'd be suicide for you to go up against a professional fighter. Didn't he knock *any* sense into that thick head of yours?"

"I won't be fighting *men*, Franciscisco." Didn't have to call Bolivar "Mister" until he turned twenty-one. "I can make enough money going up against animals."

"They fight animals here? What kind?"

"Somebody mentioned bulls."

"Bull whats?"

"I don't know. Just bulls, I guess."

"A bull is a male cow," B'ooosa said without looking up.

"That's great," I said. "What's a cow?"

Francisco shrugged his shoulders. B'ooosa didn't say anything.

"One way to find out." I fished in my pouch for the piece of paper the Mexican had given me. It had a name and a number. I punched it up on the 'phone.

A girl's face filled the screen. "*Buenas noches. Plaza de Toros de Guadalajara.*"

Hauled out my creaky Spanish again. We always used Pan-swahili around B'ooosa. "I'd like to speak to Mr. Mendez, please."

"Just a moment, please." She disappeared and came back in a couple of seconds. "Whom shall I say is calling?"

"I'm Carl Bok, of Springworld."

"I see, yes. What is it you wish to talk to Mr. Mendez about?"

"I'd like to arrange to fight a bull."

"Just a moment, please." A holding pattern

appeared on the screen and then dissolved to show a dark man in a business cape, a thick cigar protruding from beneath his bushy moustache. He spoke in heavily accented English.

"Señor Bok. I am taken to understand that you are from Springworld and you wish to fight the bulls."

"That's right."

"Have you ever fought the bulls before?"

"Señor Mendez, I've never even *seen* a bull. But I need money."

He laughed. "One might admire your courage, but . . ." He reached to his right and brought a shiny black ceramic figure into view. "This is how a bull looks, Señor Bok. But very big, sometimes five hundred kilograms. And very, very dangerous."

"I'm not exactly a midget, myself. How are these bulls fought?"

"Señor, there are two ways of fighting the bulls. One is the *corrida*, which is . . . very hard to explain, but you could not do this. It is a special way of fighting the bull, which takes many years of difficult training. And the bull always dies. Sometimes the '*matador*', which is what we call this special kind of gladiator, sometimes he dies, too. But not often. It is not an easy profession to master."

He was absently stroking the ceramic bull. An ash fell from his cigar.

"And the second way?"

"The other kind of fighting the bulls requires less knowledge, less experience. But it is far more dangerous. The bull does not always die, does not usually die. Thus he becomes used to fighting with men. As we say, he becomes '*wise*'. And the men die almost as often as the bulls. Almost every night a man dies. It is sad, but the *turistas* seem to like this better than the *corrida*. And there is never a shortage of boys, foolish boys, who want to face the bulls. Except certain bulls, who learn too much. Even the boys are afraid of them."

"What kind of weapons are allowed?"

"There are three classes, Señor Bok. All may use a cape—this is to distract the bull in its charge. One class may use an *estoquita*, what you would call a short sword, or a long knife. This pays P200. The second class may use a club, not a vibroclub; this pays P400. The third class uses only the cape, and pays P750."

"And this third has to kill the bull with his bare hands?"

"Oh no, Señor. In any of the classes it is sufficient to merely stun the bull, to bring him to his knees."

"When is the soonest I could fight?"

He flipped through the pages of a little book. "Señor Bok, the *only* opening I have in the next two weeks is tomorrow night, at 7:30. But this bull, you don't want to fight him."

"Why? Is he one of the wise ones?"

"Si, very wise. He is called *La Muerte Vieja*, The Old Death. He has won every time he has faced a man, twelve matches. Even the foolish boys, with more courage than brains, know better than to fight this bull. That is why he has no opponent. Twelve matches..."

"Well, he'll lose the thirteenth. Put me down for the third class. Just the cape."

"Señor! You don't know..."

"I'm very big, Señor Mendez. More than twice as big as an Earthman."

"But less than half the size of *Muerte Vieja*. You are untrained. You are placing yourself in grave danger."

"We'll see, Señor. I'll come by your office tomorrow."

"Very well. The *turistas* will love the blood." He shook his head sadly. "*Buenas noches*, Señor Bok. And good luck."

"*Buenas noches*." The screen faded.

"You're insane," Francisco said quietly. "Totally insane."

"No he isn't," B'ooosa said. "Not totally. You don't know much about Springworld, do you, Pancho?"

B'ooosa could get away with calling him Pancho. "Just that it's full of stupid giants and it's not important enough to be a stop on the Tour. Why?"

"You tell him, Carl." B'ooosa went back to his tapes.

"What should I know about your fabulous world?"

"I wouldn't know where to begin. Look at me." I walked to his chair, towered over him. "I'm a giant because only giants could survive on Springworld. With the possible exception of Hell, it's the harshest planet ever colonized. Take those hurricanes on your planet, magnify the force of those winds by a factor of four. They sweep across Springworld six or seven times a year, leveling damn near everything in sight. All our permanent structures are underground. Between the storms we cultivate and harvest the Volmer plants, a kind of a lichen that grows in the crevasses of rock formations. And while we're doing this we have to watch out for the quakes, the twisters, and animals you wouldn't believe."

"Try me."

"We've got lots of native animals, Francisco, and a few others that have slipped in and adapted themselves. Almost all of them are big

and mean. This bull sounds like he's about the size of my pet razorlizard. But my pet has teeth, spines, and claws... and I tamed him myself."

"I see. But I doubt that your cuddly pet was fully grown when you trained him. I doubt that he had fought twelve men before you came along with your leash."

"True enough. He was small—not much bigger than you—when I caught him. With my bare hands, I might add. I have confidence."

"I hope it's warranted." He shook his head. "Anyhow, we'll see tomorrow."

"We? Are you coming along?"

"Of course. Somebody has to bring back the pieces."

IV.

We got to the Plaza de Toros early. I signed a contract full of fine print, absolving everybody in sight from the responsibility of safety to my body, and went down to the "gladiator's box," a set of front-row seats.

They hadn't started the knock-down, drag-out fullfights yet, but were still doing *corridas*.



Carl Bok

It was a fascinating spectacle, exciting but sad. Sometimes very delicate and graceful, sometimes brutal.

Senor Mendez said that the *corrida* had been fought for over two thousand years with very little change. It did have a pagan, primitive feel to it. Nowadays, especially on Springworld and Hell, death is rarely such a long drawn-out affair.

Everybody was dressed in fancy costumes for the *corrida* (normal gladiators fight naked, the way they did on Selva) and they marched through a complicated ritual before each bull was killed.

When they first let the bull into the ring, a bunch of men riding large animals called horses would make the bull charge and try to stab him with a spear while he was trying to get at the horse. The spears (called pics) only went in an inch or so and served to tire the bull and make him mad.

Eventually the matador came out—unarmed—and made the bull charge his cape, a big red piece of stiff cloth that he held out away from his body. The closer the matador let the bull come to his body, the louder the crowd cheered. That was the best part, as far as I was concerned. That little guy had to be some kind of brave. I watched a half-dozen of them and, somehow, nobody got hurt. I could see why Señor Mendez said it took so many years of training.

The last part was the most dangerous. It was also the saddest. This was the so-called moment of truth, where the matador kills the bull. He hides a sword behind his cape and when the bull charges the cape (or the matador; by this time he might have figured it out) he whips the sword out, stabs the bull. Sometimes he has to do it several times before the bull finally lies down and dies. I'd never believed the death of an animal could affect me so much—I've killed thousands protecting myself and the crops on Springworld—but by the last *corrida* I had decided I wasn't going to kill Muerte Vieja. No way.

A dark young man sat down next to me. "Buenos dias."

"Good day," I said in Spanish. "Are you fighting today?" Stupid question. He was sitting in the gladiator's box as naked as I was.

"Of course." He couldn't stop staring at me. "The first bull, Hermano de la Oscuridad. You?"

"The second. Muerte Vieja."

"Jesús Christ—how did Mendez talk you into that?"

"He didn't. Actually, he tried to talk me out

of it."

He shrugged. "Well, you're big enough. I suppose if anybody can take Muerte V., you can. Where's your estoquita?"

"I'm not using one."

"Aye! You're out of your head! A club just isn't—"

"No," I said. "Just the cape."

He let out his breath in a whistle and shook his head. "Senor, I'm afraid you have more *cojones* than brains."

"Who doesn't?" I was feeling a little giddy, a small case of stage fright, I guess. "A man with more than one brain would look very strange." He laughed a kind of a squeaky giggle. I think he was as nervous as I was. "Seriously, I don't expect too much trouble. I grew up on a planet full of large animals, most of them wild. I learned to handle them at an early age."

"Still . . . what planet was that?"

"Springworld."

"Never heard of it. Is everybody on Springworld as large as you?"

"Most are bigger."

He whistled again. "Maybe you can take him, then. May the luck be with you."

We sat back and watched the *corrida* for a while. They were dragging a dead bull out. The matador was walking around the ring, bowing to applause.

The stands were starting to fill up. Must have been the *turistas*, come to see the real thing. Us.

"Do you know why they call him 'the old death'? Why he got his name?"

"I assume he's killed people."

"A lot of bulls kill fighters. But only Muerte Vieja has killed six. Half of those who have fought him. Of the ones who have lived . . . well, they no longer face the ring."

I could guess why.

"Have you ever seen him fight?" I asked.

"Yes. Four times." He scratched the stubble on his chin. "The last three times, the fighters died on his horns. Now nobody will fight him, not even the young foolish ones. Nobody but you." The tone of his voice indicated that wasn't exactly a compliment.

For some reason it hadn't occurred to me to be scared. Suddenly I was very aware of the sand drifting in the arena, the smell of blood, the rough wood of the bench I was sitting on. All of a sudden it wasn't a game anymore, it was *real* and my throat went dry, cold sweat broke out on my forehead and palms.

"Would you like some advice? I've probably fought more bulls than you have." I couldn't tell whether he was being sarcastic or not. I

didn't even care.

"Sure. Sounds like I can use all the help I can get."

"First, forget about the cape. Muerte V. knows all about capes, he is a very wise bull. He'll ignore it and charge for your body. Best to have both hands free."

I was glad to hear that. I'd planned to wrestle him the way we wrestle young razor-lizards. The cape would just get in the way.

"Second, always stay to his right. He tries to hook with his left horn, and he's half blind in his right eye."

"He hooks with his left because he can't see well with his right?"

"No, señor, all bulls favor one horn or the other. I wish to God that the man who struck his eye had hit the left—that would probably have been the end of Muerte V., before he could earn his name. Five good men would still be alive."

"Five?"

"Yes. The man who clubbed the bull's eye was impaled on his left horn when he did it. It went in the groin and came out just below the navel. He was dead before they could get him out of the ring. He was the last to fight him with only a club. He was also a friend of mine, a brave man who had fought many bulls."

I shuddered. What had I gotten myself into? "Anything else I should know?"

"Hmm . . . señor, Muerte V. is old, quite old for a fighting bull. You might be able to outlast him by making him charge from far away. Do this many times. Dodge each charge and run in the opposite direction. By the time he can stop and turn, he will have a long way to charge again. Don't try anything stylish or brave. Just keep running from him, you might wear him out. The *turistas* won't like it, but better to be hissed than dead."

"I get paid the same whether I get cheered or not."

"Exactly. Though I wish . . . I wish you had an *estoquita*. Perhaps with your long arms you could find an opening and kill the beast. He's a noble bull, and it's always sad to see a brave one die—but he may kill another six before he's too old to fight. And only boys will go against him, desperate boys, beginners. Too many more will die in the sand."

It was late afternoon and getting dark, shadows spread across the arena. Suddenly overhead lights crackled on and a loudspeaker blared, in English: "Ladies and gentlemen, the gladiatorial combat will begin in about fifteen minutes. The first pair is Octavio Ramirez, veteran of fourteen fights, against the bull

Hermano de la Oscuridad—Brother of Darkness—seeing his third fighter. Cape only." Then the announcer repeated it—in Spanish, then Pan-swahili.

"You're not using a weapon either."

"No, but Hermano isn't Muerte V. I'm quite confident."

We talked about bullfighting—both kinds, Octavio wanted to be a *matador* some day—until a trumpet blared over the loud-speaker, signaling that the fight was about to begin. A door opened and Hermano galloped out into the ring. He was smaller than the bulls killed in the *corrida*; Octavio told me that was usually the case.

The men on horses (called *picadores*) were on the field when the bull came out. But this time both horses and men were sheathed in light plastic armor rather than the gaudy costumes. Octavio watched with great concentration as the bull charged the horses. This way, he said, you could predict how he would act when you faced him alone in the ring.

The *picadores* "pic'd" the bull about a dozen times, then rode out of the ring. Octavio jumped over the wall onto the sand.

"Wish me luck, Carl."

"*Bueno suerte*, Octavio . . ." He waved a hand and walked out to meet the bull.

The referee watched very closely. He had a high-powered rifle loaded with sleep-darts—if Octavio were injured badly (signifying the end of the match), he could knock out the bull with one dart, and the medics could come take Octavio to safety. Unfortunately, often the dart wouldn't take effect immediately—or the fighter would be injured so badly it wouldn't make any difference. But Octavio didn't look scared.

He stopped about twenty feet from the bull and whipped the cape at him. Hermano had been watching Octavio without too much interest until he saw the cape. Then he started walking toward him and, about halfway, broke into a run.

Octavio stood his ground and let the bull pass inches away from his body, guiding the beast with a slow, graceful sweep of the cape. I'd learned the move was called a "*veronica*," a classic maneuver over a thousand years old. The crowd cheered as the bull slipped past. Hermano slowed so quickly that he actually skidded, then turned around and charged again. Octavio was waiting, and lured him by with another *veronica*. He repeated this several times, then Hermano seemed to get disgusted and just walked away. He leaned up against the ring wall, looking tired or maybe just

bored.

Octavio got in front of him and whipped the cape. The bull just looked at him. He came closer and whipped again. Nothing. Closer still—and suddenly Hermano leaped at him. Octavio put the cape out, but the bull wasn't interested and went directly for the fighter. He saw what was happening, threw the cape into the bull's face and leaped aside. I saw the referee bring the rifle to his shoulder and take aim.

But the bull missed, and went a good twelve meters before it stopped and tossed the cape away with a shake of his head. Now Octavio had to fight without the cape. I figured it probably wouldn't make too much difference; the bull was obviously "wise". Octavio moved toward the center of the ring and Hermano watched him go, his huge head swivelling slowly.

Suddenly the bull charged. Octavio set his feet and crouched forward, waiting. When the bull was only a few feet away, he jumped, touching the bull's shoulders with his feet, and did a double somersault over Hermano's back. He landed on his feet and whirled around. The bull charged on, tossing his head. Eventually he stopped and looked from side to side, puzzled. The crowd roared with laughter.

Octavio shouted and the bull looked around. He started to circle the fighter slowly, then charged again. The same stunt, and the bull was mystified again.

Octavio "jumped" the bull five times. You could tell Hermano was getting tired: it took him longer to come back after each charge. Maybe Octavio was getting tired, too. On the sixth charge he must have jumped too soon; he landed on the bull's head instead of his shoulders, and Hermano tossed him straight into the air. He landed on his stomach and lay still.

Hermano skidded in a tight circle and charged back, his horns low. The rifle cracked, but the bull charged on, then stumbled, then fell in a heap not two meters from Octavio.

The crowd gasped and then cheered.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the loudspeaker said, "although Señor Ramirez was beaten by the bull Hermano, and thus is not eligible for the regular prize, the judges have agreed to award him a special purse of 500 pesas, for extraordinary valor and skill."

The *turistas* cheered, but looking at Octavio stretched out on the sand suddenly I didn't feel that my P750 was that much money after all.

"The next match, ladies and gentlemen, will

be a special treat—for the first time in Guadalajara, perhaps in all the world, one of the giant supermen of Springworld will fight a bull, with only the cape—and not just any bull, ladies and gentlemen, but the famous and terrible Muerte Vieja!"

Cheers. But I didn't feel like a "giant superman." I just felt scared.

"And so, in fifteen minutes, Carl Bok of Springworld, in his first fight, against Muerte Vieja, seeing his thirteenth fighter—162 kilos of human brawn and wit against 450 kilos of wise bull. Bets may be placed with the robot vendors."

I wondered what the odds were. But I wasn't sure I wanted to find out.

V.

The medics carried Octavio away and an electric tractor hauled off the sleeping bull. From hidden nozzles in the sand, water sprayed in a fine mist, to settle the dust. After a few minutes, the picadores came out.

Then the trumpet again and Muerte Vieja thundered into the ring. What was it Octavio had said about these bulls being smaller? Ha! This one looked very big. And very mean. He started to charge for the nearest horse, then slowed and stopped, just out of pic'ing range. He remembered.

The picador urged his horse closer, but the huge bull kept backing out of range. Looking wily rather than frightened, he backed halfway across the arena. Another picador circled around and stabbed him from behind.

Muerte V. roared and spun around, catching the horse's armored belly with his horns. He tossed his head and lifted horse and rider nearly a meter off the ground. They seemed to hang motionless for a brief moment—and then they fell to earth with a clatter of plastic armor. The picador flew over his horse's head and plowed into the sand.

The man was trying to stand up when Muerte V. slammed into him from behind. A toss and the man was flying again, spinning end over end like a thrown rag doll.

The horse slowly got to his feet and staggered away. Muerte V. didn't even look at him, but charged under the man and caught the picador on his horns before he could reach the ground. He tossed the man again, but by then the other picadores had the bull surrounded, so he couldn't chase after him.

They pic'ed him unmercifully while the dismounted man crawled to safety. Even with

all his armor, it looked as if he'd had more than just the wind knocked out of him. Still, I'd have been glad to trade places with him.

They must have pic'd the bull at least thirty times before they formed in a line and paraded off the ring. The board fence creaked under my weight and almost buckled as I vaulted over. I was so scared my knees were trembling, they almost gave out when I hit the ground. By the time I got my balance, the bull had covered half the distance between us. The ground shook with the beat of his hooves.

My feet wanted to run but there was no place to go. I took Octavio's advice and stood as still as I could manage until Muerte V. was only a couple of meters away, then I leaped to my left and landed running. I felt the wind of the bull passing and then heard a loud splintering crash.

Looking over my shoulder, I could see that the bull had collided with the fence and his horns were stuck in the wood. He freed himself with a toss of his head that sent boards flying. I ran on a few steps and stopped, turned to face him. He'd already begun his charge. I got set to jump again. Once more he tilted his head and tried to hook me with his left and I jumped out of his way as he stamped by.

I sprinted about a hundred meters—no trick at all in Earth gravity—and turned, but he wasn't coming after me. He just stood there, watching. After I stopped, he walked toward me very slowly. He came to a halt maybe ten meters away.

His breath was a sandpapery rasp and his mouth was flecked with white foam. Streaks of blood, dull brown with caked dust, ran from the pic wounds. A milky film covered his bad eye, and the lid was half-shut. One horn had broken off a few centimeters from the tip, and ended in jagged splinters rather than a point. A hoof pawed the sand and his right ear twitched constantly. Even from this distance he stank, a mixture of wet fur and bad meat.

He charged. I tensed and jumped, but this time he wasn't fooled a bit—sharp pain in my leg and I spun awkwardly around, landed on my shoulder and face. Wiped sand out of my eyes and staggered to my feet. Bright red blood pulsing out of my calf.

The referee had his rifle up but didn't shoot. Too late, I realized I should have stayed down. That might have ended the match. Muerte V. stumbled in a turn—he was tiring—and charged back.

Couldn't jump, so I waited, and when he got close enough I sidestepped, grabbed a horn

and twisted myself up onto his back, just like you would do to tackle a razorlizard. I clamped my long legs around his chest and rode.

I hung onto his neck while he bucked and tossed, trying to get me with those horns. He was going for the wall and I knew I'd be crushed if I didn't do something. I let go of his neck and, next time he tossed, grabbed a horn in each hand and leaned all my weight to one side. His head twisted and the horn bit into the ground, sent up a spray of sand for meters and then *crack!*

I floated through the air for what seemed like a long time, then my chest scraped along the sand for a while and I stopped, tried to scramble up, fell, got up again and looked back.

Muerte V. was lying on his side, shuddering. He gave a kick with his back legs and lay still. The crowd was whistling and stomping—I didn't know whether that was good or bad—and I limped over to the bull's body and saw what had killed him. His horn dragging through the sand had hooked a pipe buried under the surface, part of the plumbing used to water down the sand between fights. The shock of hitting it at full speed must have broken his neck.

Two medics and a man in formal clothes came into the ring. The man handed me a check—750 pesas—and said something in rapid-fire Spanish that I couldn't follow. The medics guided me off the sand, to the infirmary. The crowd was still making a lot of noise and I was just trying to stay upright.

They put me on a table—the beds were too small—and started treating my leg. Octavio was stretched out on one of the beds, still unconscious. A door opened and Francisco came in.

"Carl! Are you all right?"





Pancho

"Dandy. Bleeding is my hobby."

"Don't worry, señor," one of the medics said. "You'll be out of here in a half-hour. We've fixed a million of these little *coronadas*."

"Did it go well, Francisco? How did I look?"

"Call me Pancho, man. Didn't you hear the loudspeaker?"

"No."

"They called it one of the greatest . . . killings they'd seen in Guadalajara. They want you back."

"Thanks, anyhow. I think I've had my share of bulls."

"I should think so."

We both watched them work on my leg. Having sprayed it with something that felt cold and stopped the pain, they put on plastic clamps that held the edges of the wound together. Then one of them mixed up a dish of plastiflesh and painted it over the wound.

"We can take the clamps off as soon as the plastiflesh dries, señor. It will hurt for a day or two, but by the time the plastiflesh peels off, you'll be good as new. "Here." He handed me a little vial of pills. "Don't take more than four a day."

"Shouldn't I see a doctor?"

He laughed. "For a little scratch like that? No, señor, just eat a couple of good rare steaks to put back the blood you lost. Why pay a doctor to tell you that you'll be all right in a week?"

"He's right, Carl," Pancho said. "Earth may not have much to be conceited about, but it's a great place to get sick. Even Heaven sends people here to learn medicine."

After about fifteen minutes they took off the clamps and tried to find me a cane. They had quite a collection, but none of them were long enough to do me any good. I just swallowed a pill and limped away.

By the time we got on the underground, the pain was almost gone. Almost.

"Well, Carl, I guess that bull finally punched some sense into you. It was a nice gesture, but . . ."

"Gesture nothing. I'm still going to pay back the fund. Every pesa."

"But you said—"

"I said I'm not going to fight any more *bulls*, and I'm not. Those animals have been bred for fighting for two thousand years, man, and they have gotten pretty tough. Just a plain animal, a wild animal, I can take. You know if they have any reptiles, like lizards? Lizards I can handle."

"That, I don't know. This planet's so crowded, I doubt they have many animals around that aren't used just for food."

"Well, Octavio—he's the little fellow that fought before I did—said they use these bulls for food after they're killed in the ring. Maybe there's all kinds of animals they do the same thing with."

"Could be. We could ask around."

"Yeah—I know just the place to go."

Pancho grinned, rubbed his hands together. "Well, don't leave me out. As I say, somebody has to go along to pick up the pieces."

VI.

The Plaza de Gladiadores was much different at night. No more people than were there during the day, I guess, but they all seemed to be outdoors. Hot as it was, I can't blame them. All the musicians were outside, too; it was loud and festive and not too well lit. There were only a couple of light-panels, most of the illumination came from long torches burning. There was a delicious smell of meat roasting. I realized I was hungry, really starved. In front of one of the taverns they were cooking a huge slab of meat over an open pit of glowing coals.

Waiters were scurrying in and out of the taverns, balancing large trays piled high with food. The trays were almost as big as the waiters themselves, the food looked delicious.

"So this is where you spent the day," Pancho said. "Now I wish I had missed the museum, too."

We sat down at a small plastic table under a huge old tree and a waiter came over. We ordered drinks and meat—strong drinks and rare meat.

"Now what?" Pancho asked. "We just sit here until some—" He was interrupted by a heavy *thud*, followed by a low twang; exactly the sound a thrown knife makes. A dagger had appeared in the tree between us. It looked vaguely familiar.

"Shee-ize, Springer! You still here?" The Heller from this afternoon came swaggering up, pulled his knife out of the tree and sat down. "Just can't soak up enough of this local color, can ya?"

I explained in a few words about the bullfight. He had heard of Muerte Vieja, but had never seen him in action.

He inspected the fresh scar on my leg. "Gonna give up the bulls for a little scratch like that? Shize, I seen guys took a horn in the gut and were back—"

"Hell no!" Pancho said, with more violence than I would've used against this customer. "Carl just wants to try some other kind of animal. The bulls—"

"Aw yeah," the Heller said with a chuckle. "I shoulda known, a big mother like you, them bulls wouldn't be no big shize. Where you goin'—Houston?"

"I don't know. That's what I came back here for, to find out what else there was to fight."

"You don't know about Houston, the Houston Sea?" We both shook our heads. "Tiburónes—great fun! You never seen a tiburón fight?"

"What is that in English? What kind of an animal?" Pancho asked. Guess they don't have them on Selva, either.

"Sharks, man, tiburónes. Great big fish, sharks; rows of teeth, big teeth. Great fun!"

"How much do you get for killing one?"

He laughed. "You can't kill 'em, man. They'd probably toss you in the slammer if you killed one of them. All you gotta do is stay alive. Think it's P300 a minute."

"Man . . . eaters?" Pancho said.

"R-i-g-h-t, man, dightin' right." He was getting excited at the idea. "They eat men. They eat fish. They eat each other. They eat anything. I heard they'll even eat a plastic two-by-four if they're hungry enough. And they're

always hungry."

"How big are they?" I asked.

"Come in all sizes—little ones the size of your arm up to biggies twice your size. And man, they hungry all the time."

"Weapons?"

"Nothing but a dightin' vibroclub."

Didn't sound too good. On Springworld we hunt fish, swimming underwater for them—but they don't hunt us back! Nothing carnivorous in our oceans and lakes is as big as a man. Besides, I wasn't sure how well I could fight underwater.

"Hmm . . . I don't know," I said. "Know of anyplace they fight lizards?"

He roared with laughter. "Lizards? Them little green dighters? How many you want to take on at once? A thousand? A million?"

"Guess you don't."

"No man." He sobered a little. "What, you got lizards on Springworld big enough to fight?"

"Bigger than your tiburónes. Lots of teeth, long claws."

He raised both eyebrows. "Then you got nothin' to worry about. These sharks—they really do look mean and all, but all you gotta do is touch 'em on the nose with a vibroclub and they swim away. Almost nobody ever gets bit. Almost."

I looked at Pancho. "Think I'll try it."

He shook his head. "I think you'd try it even if you didn't know how to swim. God!"

The Houston Sea was about two thousand kilometers from Guadalajara, five thousand from Chimboraço. To save money (my money, anyhow), we took the shuttle to Guadalajara and, from there, an airbus to Houston. Didn't save too much money, though; travel's pretty cheap on Earth. Most of the public transportation is taken care of by the taxes everybody seems to pay.

It was a "tourist special" and we had plenty of time in the air to read the brochures. The Houston Sea is a kind of natural memorial to a big turning point in human history, when the old Atomic Age nations went out with a bang and Alianza moved in to fill the power vacuum. The Houston Sea used to be a land mass called Texas. The big port they call Houston used to be an inland town called Oklahoma City.

I liked Houston better than any of the other Earthie cities we'd seen. For one thing, everybody spoke English. It wasn't crowded or dirty and you could smell the salt air from anywhere in the city.

The "shark shows" were handled by an organization called Underseas Entertainments, Inc. They were located in a skyscraper just offshore, an old-fashioned building half underwater. We saw our first shark while we were gliding over the water on the covered sidewalk that connected the skyscraper to land.

"There's one," said Pancho, pointing off to our left.

It was swimming along just under the surface, one fin sticking out of the water. It was grey and leathery-looking and just a little smaller than I am. Which is pretty big, for a fish.

"Make a good-sized dinner," I said with a nervous chuckle.

"You or it?" asked Pancho. We both stared at the fin neatly slicing the water. I didn't answer him.

Since I had phoned ahead and made an appointment, they were expecting us. A young man at the reception desk told us to go down the lifter to the "minus-two" floor, two stories underwater.

Stepping out of the lift, we found ourselves facing a transparent wall. It brought us up short; we both stopped dead and stared. I didn't even try to count the number of sharks on the other side of the plastic. Most of them were about a meter long, some a little less. But there were five or six the size of the one we'd seen topside and they all looked hungry.

The strange thing about these sharks was that they were constantly moving; they never stopped, they never rested. It made them seem less like fish, more like some streamlined eating machine. On Springworld, I'd spent hours watching fish, but all the fish I'd ever seen spent a good part of their time just floating in one place with their gills waving around, like they were resting or thinking. These creatures flicked and wiggled in and out of sight continuously, as if they were constantly looking for something. Probably lunch. They had a terrible kind of beauty, a mixture of grace and meanness—the wide, unblinking eyes, the huge crescent mouth. One swam by with his mouth partly open; it was full of wicked-looking, triangular teeth.

"Quite a sight—eh, boys—" I turned, startled. It was the man I'd talked to on the 'phone, I recognized his garish blood-red tunic. Mr. DeLavore.

"You must be Mr. Bok." He grabbed my hand with his tiny one and pumped it up and down. He turned to Pancho. "And . . . ah . . ."

"Señor Bolivar." Pancho said.

"Good, good." DeLavore gave Pachó's hand

the same treatment, introducing himself. "You must be Mr. Bok's partner. Won't you both please follow me."

We followed him through a door, down a corridor to another door, this one with his name on it. We passed through an empty anteroom into a plush office.

"Sit down, please, sit down." He stood behind his desk while Pancho sank into a deep easy chair. I eased myself onto the arm of one and it didn't break.

He settled behind his desk and made a steeple with his fingers, studied it for a long second. An unexpected furrow appeared in his smooth forehead and he cleared his throat.

"I'm not in the business of talking people out of joining our Shark Show team. But I have to make sure before anyone signs anything that . . . that they know exactly what they're getting into."

"I know that it's dangerous," I said. Trying to be helpful.

"But you're from offworld. Both of you're from offworld. Have you ever seen a Shark Show?" We hadn't, of course.

"I shouldn't think so. Our offworld franchise only extends to one planet outside of Earth-system. And neither of you are Hellers, obviously."

"Fighting sharks, well . . . here." He took two objects out of a drawer and laid them on his desk. Weapons. "You've seen vibroclubs before." I hadn't. It was a metallic stick about a third of a meter long with a wooden handle and a wrist strap.

"Don't use it. You have a choice, of course, but don't use it, take my advice. The worst thing you can do to a shark is to hurt him. That makes him angry, and if you get a shark angry you just don't have a chance." He set the vibroclub down.

"That's for grandstanders and . . . suicides. You get paid twice as much, but you probably won't get to enjoy spending it. This is what you want to use." He picked up the other instrument. "This is a billy, a shark billy."

The shark billy was a plastic stick about a meter long, with a flat plate on one end that had lots of little nails sticking out of it.

"You use this to *push* the shark away," he said, demonstrating. "The small nails don't hurt him; they're just to make the billy cling to his hide."

"I have some tapes here that show you how to use it." He pulled the drapes behind his desk, exposing a huge holovision cube. We saw several tapes of people using the billy. It didn't look too difficult—when a shark swims toward you, you just thrust the thing at his nose and

push him away.

None of the tapes showed a person fighting alone, though; all of them were two people, back to back.

"Do you use the billy any different when you don't have a partner?" I asked.

"Oh, if your partner's hurt, we try to pull you out immediately. There's no—"

"No, I mean if you don't *have* a partner. Fighting alone."

"Alone?" He looked puzzled, then astonished. Then he laughed. "No, nobody fights alone. Never. If you left your back unprotected, you'd be hit from behind immediately. The sharks'd have your kidneys for breakfast."

"But I'd planned—"

"Mr. DeLavore," Pancho interrupted, "sometimes it takes this big boob a long time to catch on. I'm going to be his partner, of course."

"Pancho!" I was aghast. "You can't risk—"

"Risk, nothing. I'm not going to let you have all the fun."

"Well, fun... uh, before either of you decide, there's one more tape I've got to show you."

It started out like all the others, except that one of the fighters was a woman. They drifted down in the shark cage, a framework of close-spaced metal bars, and swam out of it when it reached camera level. Each of them was wearing a weight-belt with a freshly-killed fish attached (the sharks won't normally attack a human being; they go after the bait and the human kind of gets in the way). They swam out a short distance and took the normal back-to-back position. There were about half-a-dozen small sharks circling them. They threw away their shark billies and held hands.

"Until then," DeLavore whispered, "we hadn't known they were suicides."

Before the billies had sunk out of view, one of the small sharks shot in for the attack. He opened his mouth impossibly wide and slammed into the fish on the girl's belt. His teeth evidently sank into her abdomen and got hung up on the leather belt. He started thrashing around, stuck, and she tried to push him away with feeble gestures. Then a huge striped shark, bigger than me, slid up from underneath them and, ignoring the people, swallowed half of the small shark and just kept on going. But the little shark had too good a grip on her and she... unravelled as the two fish sped upward. The people disappeared in a cloud of blood and suddenly there was nothing but sharks, dozens of them flying in from every direction. And inside the billows of blood, a dim scene of incredible ferocity;

sharks twisting and worrying away at their quarry, fighting with other sharks over choice bits...

"Whew." The picture faded. "Things like that happen often?"

"No. Definitely not. Sharks look dangerous and, although singularities like this are horribly impressive, they're actually afraid of people, most of them. And they're cautious, anyhow, by nature." He slid the curtain back in place.

"By our statistics, an untrained man—as long as he can swim with a tank and is reasonably careful—has less than a two-percent chance of being bitten during the show."

"That two percent is what the people watch for, though," Pancho said.

DeLavore reddened, shrugged his shoulders. "That may be. We've never made a survey."

"If you do get bitten," I asked, "how badly are you likely to be injured?"

He hesitated, then looked straight at me. "You'll die. Most likely, you'll die."

He didn't seem to be fudging on *that* statistic.

"I don't want to mislead you as to the danger. A single shark probably won't kill you. When people normally get bitten—outside the show, that is—it's usually no worse than a lost limb or a large chunk of meat. If they manage to get by the shock, they can go to a regeneration clinic. But most of those are attacked by a single shark. There are literally hundreds of them near the camera site for Shark Show. Once you start to bleed, you'll attract the attention of every shark in the neighborhood. Even if you're right above the cage it's not likely you'll get to shelter in time. They can move very quickly, as you have seen."

"Well, Carl?" Pancho said.

"Well" yourself. I'm in this for the money, and you—"

"You've got yourself a couple of shark fighters, Mr. DeLavore."

Never try to figure out a Selvan

VII.

They fitted us out with tanks and got some flippers for Pancho. I didn't get any flippers; my feet were almost as big as the largest size they had. They adjusted our weight belts—I had to wear two—and gave us our billies. We decided we weren't quite crazy enough for vibroclubs.

For about thirty minutes we practiced swimming—floating, actually—in the protected pool below the ready room. It was a lot like exercising in the zero-g gym on *Starschool*. No

sweat at all.

Then we ended up waiting in the ready room until just before seven. It was wet, cold, and damp, not at all like the plush offices. It was awkward sitting on the low wooden benches. Pancho and I spent a long time staring at a bunch of empty lockers.

Finally a bored attendant came in and gave us some last-minute instructions. He was pretty scarred up and missing a couple of fingers. Guess he hadn't made it to the regeneration clinic in time.

"If you just never let 'em know you're scared, you won't have no trouble. Just keep calm and keep pushin' 'em away. Keep looking at your feet, don't forget that—look at your feet. The biggies usually attack from below. Don't even think about your back unless you feel your partner get hit—and that's the only time you hurry; get back in that cage fast. Every shark in the neighborhood'll be after you. One at a time, you can take care of them, no matter how big and mean. But you can't handle fifty. Got it?"

"Do we get paid for all the time we're underwater?" I asked, trying to seem equally bored.

"No, just from the time you leave the cage to the time you return. With luck, though, you'll get five or ten free minutes before the first shark gets interested."

"What if they *never* get interested?" Pancho asked.

He shrugged, spit on the floor. "Ain't happened yet."

The cage he led us to was smaller than I'd expected. I had to squeeze in the opening and couldn't stand up straight when I was inside. Everything on this world seemed to be built for midgets. As they craned us over the water, Pancho and I went over our simple strategy for the last time.

We'd stay as close to the cage as possible, keeping it directly below our feet to keep the biggies from charging straight up the way that one did on the suicide tape.

One tap on the back would mean "back to the cage" and two taps would mean "back in a hurry". We didn't figure there'd be any other kind of message of any importance.

I braced myself for the shock of entering the water and found that it was pleasantly warm, almost body temperature. Must have held my breath for a full minute before I remembered to breathe through the mouthpiece. I tried to get my body to relax a little. It wouldn't. I felt like bait on the end of a fishing line.

We dropped past the cameramen, invisible

inside their silver bubbles, and as the cage reached the end of its tether, we stopped with a soft bounce. No sharks around yet. We swam out the cage door and took up our position about two meters above. Back to back.

We floated, waiting. I could only see one of the cameramen, about twenty meters away, directly in front of me. A broad ray of light, dim green, almost exactly the color of the water, came from the silver bubble. That was the holograph laser—people could sit in their living rooms drinking beer and watch us get bitten in three dimensions.

Maybe I hadn't been paying close enough attention, but suddenly it seemed that there were quite a few sharks circling us. They were staying some ten or fifteen meters out and didn't look particularly aggressive, but I kept a wary eye on them anyway.

Pancho moved a couple of times and I assumed he was fighting. I still wasn't worried, because these fish were only a meter or so long and didn't look like they could give you too much trouble, even bare-handed.

Suddenly, all the sharks I could see swam off in a hurry. They were instantly replaced by a herd of individuals about twice their size. We'd been warned that groups of sharks are usually sharply segregated by size and you rarely saw a big and a little one together. There was an obvious reason: the little one would soon end up inside the big brother.

They must have circled for five minutes before the first one approached. He slid to within two meters of me—one shark length!—and stopped obediently when he ran into my shark billy. He turned and swam lazily away. I started to relax a little.

We had several encounters like that. I could feel Pancho's activity against my back. It wasn't too terribly frightening, the big sharks didn't seem to be all that interested in us. One by one, they went away to more fruitful pursuits.

I just floated there counting my money, 150 pesas every minute. Two hours' worth of air in the tanks—a fortune if they kept away.

I suppose I had about ten minutes' worth of that kind of optimism. The next group was a bunch of really tiny sharks, about half the size of the first pack. They came in closer than the others, but few of them seemed disposed to attack. Every now and then one would make a mad dash for the fish on my belt—faster than the big ones—but I always managed to push him away in time.

Suddenly Pancho pounded on my back, twice. During the split second while I was deciding whether it was an accident or a signal,

I could see blood starting to diffuse through the water.

As we'd arranged, I jerked the fish from my belt and flung it to the sharks, then swam downward with all my strength. What we hadn't arranged was that Pancho and I would arrive at the cage door at the same time. Or that it would be stuck. Without thinking, I pulled the door off its hinges and shoved Pancho inside. The sharks were really moving now and there was blood everywhere. Pancho must have been hurt pretty bad. I felt sick to my stomach, but I couldn't take the time to check him out as I backed through the narrow opening, pushing away the most aggressive sharks with my billy.

Some of the sharks had been attracted to the fish we'd thrown, but most were heading for the cage. They were hauling us up, but not nearly fast enough to suit me. I faced the open cage door with my back to Pancho, pushing wildly at the sharks trying to get inside. Most of them were small, but there were a lot of them and I knew they could kill us as easily as the big ones.

I got a momentary break as a huge shark came up from below the cage and scattered the small ones around the door. It left with several wiggling in his mouth. I hoped one of them was the one that had bitten Pancho.

In cold horror, I watched the large shark turn in a sharp circle back to the cage. It was heading right for the opening.

I braced myself and pushed him square in the nose with the billy. The force of the impact sent the cage spinning. Pancho kept trying to help but I was so big I nearly filled the cage and there was no way he could get up by the door anyway. I had my hands full. The shark was not backing up like he was supposed to do. Larger than me, he filled the door, jaws opening and closing blindly. I pushed him and I pounded him and he still kept coming.

Suddenly we surged out of the water. That damn shark was more inside than out and he just wouldn't quit. Pancho came up from somewhere behind me and, working together, we finally shoved him out. He made one hell of a splash.

I got all tangled up spitting out my mouthpiece and turning to Pancho. He wasn't bleeding.

I was.

Pancho pointed at my foot. Sure enough, that was where all the blood had been coming from—I was missing a big chunk out of my ankle. I put my hand on it and blood streamed out between my fingers. Then it started to hurt. Plenty.



"God, Carl—I'm sorry. I just couldn't reach that little digther until—"

"Forget it." He couldn't help being only a meter and a half tall. "They'll patch this one up just like the other one. I'll be as good as new tomorrow."

Then I passed out.

They glued a new heel on with plastiflesh, all right, but this time it was a little more incapacitating: I was not supposed to put any weight on the foot for two days. Well, I was ready for a rest, anyway.

Sitting in the motorized chair made me exactly as tall as Pancho. It was a strange sensation, being able to talk to people without looking down. We walked and rolled back to Mr. DeLamore's office.

He was there with our money, but unfortunately he wasn't alone. B'ooosa and the dean were waiting with him.

"Carl," B'ooosa said, "this is ridiculous."

I'd had enough. "Mr. B'ooosa," I said, trying hard to hold my temper, "this may seem ridiculous to you. But you have never tried to scratch out an existence on a barren planet. You have never felt the pain of the winds wiping out an entire crop, or the futility of trading with people who take advantage of you, knowing full well there is nowhere else you can go. You could probably buy my father's farm ten times over. There is no way you can understand what this means to me."

I rolled up to the desk. "How long did we stay, Mr. DeLamore?"

"Carl . . ." B'ooosa said.

"Mr. B'ooosa," I said, not looking at him, "this is my affair, and Pancho's. You have no right to interfere and no right to bring the dean . . ."

"I asked to come," Dr. M'bisa said.

"How long?" I repeated.

Mr. DeLamore glanced at B'ooosa and the dean and licked his lips. "Eighteen and a half minutes." He handed me a check. "That gives you P2775 to split."

B'ooosa laughed humorlessly. "Get bitten about twelve more times and you'll have your 17,000, Carl. If you're lucky, maybe you'll get bitten in the head and they can grow you a new brain."

"It's not that dangerous," DeLamore snapped. "Only one out of fifty—"

"One out of fifty normal-sized people," Dr. M'bisa said mildly. "There's nobody on this planet large enough to protect a giant like Carl. We saw the fight—he's just too big a target. It was foolish to match them up, a cheap stunt. And the faulty equipment—"

"Don't worry, Dr. M'bisa," I said. "I won't be

fighting the sharks again."

"I'm glad," he sighed. "There's so much to see on Earth, so much to learn. You're missing everything, Carl."

"I'm learning," I said. I stared at the check and did some rapid mental arithmetic. P14,662.50 to go. "I'm learning a lot."

VIII.

I was supposed to stay with the class. I was supposed to stay in the wheelchair. I was supposed to start behaving myself and forget about trying to pay back the Extraweight Alien Tax. Forget it? No way.

Doing something about it, however, was a bit of a problem. B'ooosa watched me all the time, like some sort of an appointed guardian. Could hardly go to the bathroom without him.

I hobbled across the hotel room to the window.

"Don't you think you should stay off that foot until it heals?" asked B'ooosa, looking up from his books.

"It doesn't hurt too much," I lied.

"It's your body," he shrugged, putting his feet up on the table and going back to his books.

Francisco bounded into the room. He looked pretty peppy for a guy who was yesterday's shark bait. "Mail call," he said, as he plopped a small pack of envelopes on the table beside B'ooosa's feet. Mail? Who got mail around here?

I got mail. They were all addressed to me, c/o Starschool. The holo of the shark fight must have attracted a lot of attention. Springers are pretty rare on Earth and it's unusual, to say the least, to find one fighting animals.

Most of them were job offers. A lot of them mentioned bulls. I'd had enough of bulls and sharks to last me ten lifetimes. Some were from girls, wanting something called a date. They often enclosed small holos. Not bad looking, some of them; but small, small, small.

"What's all that?" asked B'ooosa, picking up one of the discarded letters.

"Business," I said.

"This doesn't look like business," said B'ooosa, picking up one of the holos. I blushed.

"Most of them are."

"You won't have time for any of that. We're leaving this afternoon to tour the Boswash Corridor, remember? Or have you even bothered to look at the itinerary?"

"Boswash. Humph."

"It's educational. You could use some enlightenment."

"I could use some money."

"Forget it, Carl. When will you get it through that thick Springer skull of yours that nobody blames you for the tax and nobody expects you to pay it back?"

"That's easy for you to say. Your family could probably buy my entire village."

B'oosa looked thoughtful for a second. Maybe he was counting it up. "That's most likely true," he said seriously. "But beside the point."

I gave up. He'd never understand me. He started pushing the letters around on the table. "Quaint custom," he said with a slight smile. "Mail. Actually written by the sender, not facsimiled. Quaint."

I saw a name I recognized and palmed the letter before B'oosa got a chance to get his hands on it. It was from Markos Salvadore, the Heller I'd met in the Plaza de Gladiadores. I slipped the letter into a fold on my tunic. Don't think B'oosa saw me.

"What's a Boswash Corridor?" I asked, feigning interest.

B'oosa looked startled, laid down the letter he was scanning. "Glad to see that you're showing a little healthy curiosity. Boswash is a megacity along the northeast coast of this continent. Very historical. Here, let me show you." He got up to get a book off the dresser.

While his back was turned, I flipped out the letter, opened it. All that was on the paper was a 'phone number. I memorized it, crumpled the paper.

"This is Boswash," said B'oosa, spreading open a book to a brightly colored map. "We'll be heading for Washdeece this afternoon and tomorrow we'll go to New'ork. When this planet was made up of a lot of separate countries, Washdeece was the capital of this particular country and New'ork was the largest city. There will be a lot for us to do and see in these cities."

"Sounds exciting," I lied. "When do we leave?"

"In about two hours."

"I can hardly wait."

That much was true.

The Washdeece terminal was everything I'd hoped it would be: loud, crowded, and hectic. Our tour group was swallowed by the seething mass of people. Everyone seemed to be in such a hurry. In a hurry for what, I couldn't imagine. Or care. It was perfect cover for me. B'oosa was on my right, Francisco on my left.

"Have to go to the bathroom," I said, turning the wheelchair abruptly, heading for the large doorway marked *Hombres*. They were

right behind me, but stayed at the entrance.

I never slowed down. Slipped the wheelchair into one of the empty stalls and headed out the back door on foot. My heel still bothered me a little, but not too much. I had to get to a 'phone.

The bathroom's back door opened into a large crowded concourse just like the one I'd left. Looked around, saw a bank of 'phones, headed for them. Quickly. I stood out like a sore thumb. Even hunched over and hobbling, I loomed over the midget Earthies.

I crammed myself into one of the booths in back, hopefully out of sight. Didn't know how much time I'd have before B'oosa and Francisco started looking for me, but it couldn't be very much. I hoped to be gone by then. Punched the number the Heller had given me. Must have been a long way off, took a whole handful of coins.

A face materialized out of the grayness. A hard face, scarred, with unruly black hair slicked back, a mustache. His frown broke a little when he caught my image. He almost smiled.

"Ah, Mr. Bok. So good of you to call. Allow me to introduce myself: Paul Wolfe of Wolfe and Associates. A certain mutual acquaintance said he might be able to get me in touch with you."

"You mean Markos Salvadore? The Heller?"

He nodded. "Mr. Salvadore does odd jobs for me from time to time. I find him a little coarse, but effective in his own way. He mentioned your problem to me."

"Problem?"

"He indicated you needed money and had a short time in which to obtain it. You may have noticed that this is somewhat difficult to accomplish on Earth."

"I've been finding that out the hard way."

"So I see. I don't know if you are aware of it, Mr. Bok, but you are creating something of a minor sensation here on Earth. Springers are not common on this planet and, I must admit, you put on quite a show. This is where I come in."

"Yes?"

"You see, one aspect of my business is, well, organizing shows such as the one you performed in with the sharks. But mine are special events; oneshots, so to speak. They are very popular with those who watch such matches, which is to say most of the population of Earth. I can pay you well."

"How well?"

"I think the figure mentioned by our friend was in the neighborhood of P15,000. Does that

sound about right?"

I nodded. It was exactly right. "What would I have to do for that?"

"Fight a polar bear to the death. Either his death or yours."

No way. I remembered the bull and how he had died. Never again.

"The money sounds fine, Mr. Wolfe, but I won't kill for it. Would it be all right if I rendered the animal unconscious instead?"

He thought for a moment, tugged at his mustache. "That would be more difficult than killing it, but I suppose that one as large as you could just possibly manage it. My public wants to see blood and they'll get it either way. The bear, of course, will be under no such restraint."

"When and where?" I asked, anxious to get moving. For P15,000 I'd wrestle a firelizard with both arms tied behind my back.

"The match will take place in Anchorage-sibirsk. Preferably tomorrow afternoon if you can manage it. I have a network slot at 1600 hours. It would fit in nicely."

"I'm on my way," I said. "Uh, how do I get there?"

"Where are you now?"

"Washdeeceee."

"Good. Take the tube from there to Seattle, then catch the shuttle up to Anchorage-sibirsk. My men will meet you there. They should have no trouble recognizing you."

I gave him a sour look. It's not my fault everyone on this planet is so small.

"Don't worry about expenses. Charge them to me." He leaned back in his chair. "I am well known here."

No doubt. Just one more thing. "These bears," I asked, "Are they anything like bulls or sharks?"

He laughed. "No. Not at all. I think you'll find this particular animal a challenge."

Not exactly what I wanted to hear.

"I will see you this evening," he said. "I look forward to meeting you in person, Mr. Bok."

"Likewise," I said and he broke the connection with a wave of his hand. For P15,000 he could be as abrupt with me as he wanted.

I unfolded myself from the booth. Tight fit. I was cramped.

"Bears, huh?" A voice behind me. A familiar one. Oh no, not now. Francisco.

"What do you want bears for?" he asked, laughing.

"What I want is the P15,000."

"We'd better go now," he said.

"No, Pancho. Look, I've got to do this."

He grabbed my arm, started to pull me

down the corridor.

"This way," he said. "Hurry."

"Hurry?"

"B'ooosa won't be gone long. I sent him to the pharmacy to get you some medicine."

"B'ooosa? Medicine?"

"I'm covering for you, you clown. Your head is as dense as your biceps. If we're going to grab the tube before B'ooosa finds out we're gone, we'd better hurry."

"We?"

"Let's just say that I'm fond of animal life."

He dragged me through the crowd.

IX.

The tube was boring, but fast and cheap. They strapped us into a two-person pod and slipped us on our way. Once again, I was a tight fit. It was uncomfortable but the trip didn't last long.

There wasn't much of anything to see, either. Most of the tube was underground. When we did come up to the surface it was always in some barren, deserted place. At 1200 kilometers per hour everything slid by pretty fast.

The Seattle terminal looked just like the one in Washdeeceee, only a little smaller. Still full of people, though. All in a hurry. We caught the shuttle to Anchorage-sibirsk without any trouble.

The shuttle was a lot slower than the tube and we got to see a good bit of the country. From what Pancho had told me, I expected everything to be meters deep in ice and snow. It wasn't that way at all. Sure there was some snow around, and ice in the mountains, but mostly there were trees. No plants on Spring-world grow half as tall as the trees we saw. I was really impressed. Although there were a few houses scattered around and several small cities, the whole area seemed mostly uninhabited. This was pretty unusual for a planet as overpopulated as Earth. Someone told us that this was one of the last places on the planet where any wilderness at all existed, mostly because people didn't care to live there. It was changing, though, and fairly fast. Days were long in the summer and certain areas were covered by automated farms that grew larger each year. A lot of people to feed on this planet.

We also learned a little about bears. Most of the people we met on the shuttle had stories about them. Most of the stories were about the terrible things they did. The stories were all second-hand, though. It took us a long time to find someone who had actually been face to

face with one. He was a grizzled old man with one arm. We found him sitting in the observation car on the shuttle. He didn't want to talk much, but after Pancho bought him a drink, he loosed up a bit.

"Not like the old days," he said. "Not a bit. My pappy and my pappy's pappy knew how to live. Seven generations in the back country, never once took a pesa from the government. A man was a man, then. Had to be, to stay alive. Things change. Everybody wants something for nothing. Government takes care of everybody. Spoon feeds 'em, does everything for 'em 'cept change their diapers. Now in the old days . . ." His voice trailed off. He stared at the mountains in the distance. "A man was a man, that's all."

"We were wondering about bears," I said. "Polar bears. Do you know anything about them?"

The old man laughed. "Bears. Hah! I was practically weaned by bears, been around 'em all my life. Mostly they're shy, stay away from people, but not always. Watch out for females with cubs, they'll tear anything apart to protect them cubs."

"I don't think we'll run into anything like that," I said hopefully.

"Also mean if they're cornered, mean as hell. If they're threatened and caught with their back against a wall, they can be ten kinds of trouble. I know. Let me tell you, I *know*. I remember that time I was running my trap lines with my son—John it was, my second son—and out of nowhere it came . . . nowhere . . ." He drifted off again, lost in thought.

"How big are these bears?" asked Pancho.

"You." He pointed at me. "You an offworlder, right?"

I nodded.

"How tall are you?"

"Two and a half meters."

"Biggest bear I ever saw was almost three meters tall, weighed more than 600 kilos. Know that for a fact, killed him and dressed him myself. Cost me four dogs and an arm. When he reared up and came at me it was like a mountain walking tall. Took a full clip before he fell and by then, well, he'd done his damage."

"What's the best way to knock one out?" I asked.

"With a big club and ten friends," he said.

"No, I mean with my hands."

"Your hands? Don't kid me." He looked me over carefully. "Guess a fella as big as you might be able to handle one at that; a small one, maybe, if you were fast enough. You got to grab him right here." He indicated a place on

the side of his neck. "Push down real hard for a few seconds. If you're in the right place and strong enough, he might go down. If you don't have it right, you're dead. You won't get no second chance."

"I hope I won't need one."

"You planning on rasslin' a bear? Boy, you got rocks for brains."

"I don't know. I think I can do it. Besides, Mr. Wolfe said—"

The old man looked like he'd been hit in the stomach. "Mr. Wolfe, you say? Mr. Paul Wolfe?"

"Yes. I talked to him and he—"

"Got no use for Wolfe and his crew," he said, getting up from his seat. "Got no use for them what does business with him." He purposely tipped his drink into Pancho's lap, eyes daring Pancho to do something about it. Everything froze for a split second.

"You see, we have—"

"Bastards," he growled, turning away from us.

I started to go after him, he didn't understand. Pancho stopped me by laying a hand gently on my arm.

"Don't do it, Carl," he said. "The man's got a grudge and I think it's pretty deep. We don't want any trouble."

We sure didn't want trouble, but as Anchorage-sibirsk slid into view, I wondered just what it was we were headed for.

The men who met us at the terminal were tough-looking, but polite and all business. They took us straight to the hotel, one of those old-fashioned glass and steel things that stick way up in the air. Wouldn't last five minutes in any halfway decent storm on Springworld. They paid us for our tube and shuttle tickets, gave us a little extra for something they called "walking around money." Told us not to leave the hotel room as Mr. Wolfe would be in touch with us shortly.

One wall of the room was glass and it looked out over the sprawling city to the mountains beyond. A light snow was falling. As cities go on Earth, this one was pretty small; only about 14-million inhabitants. Even so, it was the largest city in this part of the planet and had a pretty wild reputation as a rugged, knock-down kind of place. Pancho seemed unnaturally eager to find out. Me, I just had my sights set on that P15,000.

Before long the 'phone chimed and Mr. Wolfe's face appeared on the screen.

"Mr. Bok," he said. "I'm glad to see that you managed to arrive safely. You brought a friend, I am told." He looked in Pancho's direction.

"His name is Francisco Bolivar. Pancho."

"You understand that Mr. Bolivar cannot help you with the bear."

"He's here to give me moral support," I said.

"Very well," said Mr. Wolfe. "I have no objection. I am free to see you now. My men will bring you up."

"Up?"

"Yes. My office is located on the top floor of this building. I own this hotel. Didn't they tell you?"

"No."

He shrugged. "It is only one of my properties. And not the most profitable, by any means." Again he broke the connection abruptly. One thing was for sure; I didn't have to worry about Mr. Wolfe being good for the P15,000. Looked like he could buy planets.

We were taken by private elevator to the top floor, where we exited into a large anteroom. It was plush: thick carpets on the floor, paintings on the walls. There were several desks in the room; most of them seemed to be occupied by off-duty bodyguards who just sat there, watching us, looking tough. Large desks, looked like real wood. A woman sat at one and she smiled at us.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Bok. Mr. Bolivar." She nodded pleasantly towards us. "Mr. Wolfe is expecting you. Won't you go in?" She motioned to a door behind her desk, only one of many doors leading from the room. With all these doors and people around, it's a wonder anyone every got to see Mr. Wolfe.

I had expected to find an opulent office and I was mistaken. It was functional to the point of being stark: one desk, one phone, no books, no windows. Behind the desk sat Mr. Wolfe. He was big for an Earthie, but still quite a bit smaller than me. He didn't rise when we entered, but he did manage a kind of half smile. I figured for him that was doing pretty well.

"Mr. Bok, you're taller than I expected," he said. "Do they all come that big from Springworld?"

"Most of them," I said. "Some are taller."

"You'll do fine, Mr. Bok." He handed me a small folder, filled with papers.

I opened it, flipped through it. Lots of fine print with parties of the first part and whomevers scattered all through it. A typical contract, written by lawyers so that only lawyers could understand it. I found the important parts: P15,000 for one Carl Bok of Springworld to fight to the death (or unconsciousness) one polar bear or to stay in the arena with said animal for a minimum period of 1/2 hour.

"What if the bear doesn't feel like fighting?"

I asked Mr. Wolfe. "It's going to be a pretty dull half hour. An expensive one for you, too."

"I wouldn't worry about that, Mr. Bok. It has yet to happen."

Pancho came over and looked at the contract over my shoulder. I don't think the legalese made any more sense to him than it did to me.

"Is Mr. Bolivar your lawyer?" asked Mr. Wolfe. I got the feeling that he was only half joking.

"Oh no," said Pancho. "I'm just a student, like Carl. We are amigos, comrades."

Mr. Wolfe handed me a pen. "It's a standard business form. You will sign all three copies." He paused. "If you please," he added as an afterthought.

I signed. For P15,000 I would have signed almost anything.

Mr. Wolfe took back the pen and the folder. "Very good, Mr. Bok," he said. "The money will be waiting for you at the end of your match. I hope you will take this evening to see a little of our town. We are quite proud of it. Justifiably so, I might add. I would, however, advise you to try to stay out of trouble. That is, any trouble that might lead to physical harm. You are my property until 1630 tomorrow and I like people to take care of my property. It is a small vice of mine."

Property? Should have read the fine print, I guess.

"I'll take care of him," said Pancho.

"You do that," he said. He looked at me. "It is good to do business with you, Mr. Bok. I am sure it will work out to our mutual benefit. Good day."

It was a second before I realized we'd been dismissed. I reached over the desk and shook Mr. Wolfe's hand. Pancho and I were escorted back to our room.

Anchorage-sibirsk is supposed to be some sort of a frontier town. How anything with a population of 14 million could be considered frontier was beyond me; 14 families make a crowded city on Springworld. But Pancho was eager to find out what it was like and I owed him at least that much for getting me away from B'osa.

We started the evening out with dinner in the hotel. It was delicious, real meat and everything. When I tried to pay, they waved me aside. All taken care of by Mr. Wolfe. Whatever else is to be said about the man, he likes his property well fed.

Pancho asked at the desk what a person did for excitement in this town. The clerk said that just stepping outside was excitement enough for most people. but if we wanted to see what

the city was really like we should drop by the Casino de Mabel.

We got directions and started to walk. It was chilly, but we had light jackets. Most of the city, at least the part we were headed for, was domed. Temperature there was a constant 23°C. Before we had gone more than a few steps, a surface vehicle pulled up beside us. Although it was long and sleek, it couldn't hold more than five or six people. An extravagant waste of space.

The man sitting next to the driver slid a window back. "Mr. Bok?" he asked.

"That's me," I said.

"We're to provide transportation for you." A door slid open on our side. I looked at Pancho. He went in without question. I followed him.

Soft seats, cushions. It didn't take an expert to know that we were surrounded by real leather and wood trim. There was a bar and a 'phone in the back seat. A glass partition separated us from the front.

"Where were you headed, Mr. Bok?" The voice was a little tinny through the speaker. The volume was gentle. Someone had given a lot of thought to this vehicle.

"The hotel clerk recommended the Casino de Mabel."

"An excellent choice, Mr. Bok. We'll be there in five minutes. Please make yourself comfortable."

A fleeting thought came to me. "Does Mr. Wolfe own that, too?" I asked.

"Of course."

It figured.

The Casino de Mabel was gaudy from the outside, but no more than the other similar establishments that lined the streets. Inside was a floor show and gambling, plus the usual food and drink. The floor show was ending as we came in. They were doing something called the Can-Can. It was supposed to represent a period of time called the Gold Rush. I didn't understand any of it. Just a lot of people jumping around.

Pancho wanted to try the gaming tables. He had a little money, plus what Wolfe's men had given us. He also had a crazy idea about getting rich. I hadn't slept through the probability theory courses in math, so I wasn't tempted. All I wanted was my P15,000.

Pancho sat for a while at a table playing something called blackjack, an activity that used small plastic rectangles called cards. At least he was consistent. He consistently lost. Then he moved to a game called roulette which involved a lot of numbers and a wheel with a small ball. It looked silly. He lost there,

too, but not too much. When he moved on to something called craps, played with small cubes covered with dots, I decided to leave him to his own devices for a few minutes. I needed a breath of fresh air. The air in the casino was thick with tobacco smoke. Tobacco is illegal on Earth, but evidently that particular law was not rigidly enforced in this town. The two men watching us split up, one following me, the other staying at his seat a discreet distance behind Pancho. It didn't surprise me a bit.

Outside, standing under the awning of the casino, the fresh air felt good, although I wished the dome wasn't overhead so that I could breathe some real air for a change. It looked black and crisp beyond the dome. My bodyguard stood about ten meters away, never crowding me and never letting me out of his sight. People walked in a continuous stream up and down the walkway.

I studied their faces as they walked by. Not as much hurrying here, but maybe it was the time of day. A good many people wore hard set faces of quiet desperation. It bothered me a little and—wait! Wasn't that . . .

He bumped into me, mumbled "Tracy's Bar," and kept on going. The Heller! I turned to follow him and was bumped by another person. I started to push him away.

"Don't follow us," the second man whispered. It was Angelo, the Heller's sidekick. "Half hour from now." They both disappeared into the crowd.

As brief as it was, the encounter had attracted unwanted attention. My bodyguard was walking towards me. I bent down, pretended to pick up something off the walkway. He came up to me. I stood up, turned to walk back into the casino. "Too crowded out here," I said. He nodded and we went back inside. He stayed four or five steps behind. He'd been well trained.

I found Pancho playing a large device called a slot machine. It only took pesas and those only one at a time. I figured he'd pretty well blown most of his money. I leaned towards him, as if to inspect the coins he had in the cup in his hand.

"Trouble," I whispered. "At least I think so." As quickly as possible I told him about meeting the Heller and Angelo.

He finished losing the coins in his cup and made a big show about wanting to go somewhere else for a beer. We headed for the door and I nodded to the two men to follow us. They would have, anyway.

We got into the vehicle and the driver pulled away from the curb.

"Tracy's Bar," I told him.

"Isn't it time to head back?" he asked.

"Tracy's Bar," I said firmly. "Or we get out and walk."

The driver changed direction and the other man talked hurriedly into a microphone. I couldn't hear what they were saying. They reached some sort of a decision and the driver cut down a side road.

"Seven minutes," came the voice over the speaker. I didn't have to ask if Mr. Wolfe owned this place. I had a feeling he didn't.

Tracy's was dark and dirty, full of tobacco smoke. It was difficult to see more than a meter in front of you. Pancho and I stumbled to the bar, ordered two beers. The bartender brought them, took our money, rang it up.

"What do you figure's happening?" asked Pancho.

I shrugged in the darkness. He knew as much as I did. I picked up my beer and the bartender leaned forward and ran a rag across the bar in front of me.

"You're the Springer," said the bartender. It wasn't a question.

"That's right," I said. "What's—"

"Go to the bathroom," he said.

"What?"

"Go to the bathroom, lunkhead." He moved his head slightly to the right and I could see a dim light above a bathroom door.

I looked into my beer and whispered to Pancho. "Head for the street. See if you can drag them away. I've got to see what the Heller wants."

Suddenly Pancho moaned and I nearly broke out laughing. I didn't know the little fellow had it in him. What an actor. He clutched his stomach and twisted towards the door, knocking people aside as he went. Both of our "friends" followed him. In the confusion I slipped back to the bathroom.

I was almost there when someone grabbed me by the arm and jerked me into a dark booth. I started to pull away and a familiar voice said, "Shize, Springer, it's me."

I relaxed. Until then I hadn't realized how tense I'd been. "What's up?" I asked him.

"You are, Springer. You are."

"I don't—"

"You don't have a chance. That's not going to be an ordinary bear tomorrow, it's one of them bio-engineered things. It'll kill you. I didn't know, I swear. Wolfe's got me over a barrel for some things I did for him a long time ago when I was young and hungry. He figured I could get you here and I did. But I didn't know he was setting you up."

"He thought he was helping you, amigo,"

said Angelo.

"I should have known better than to trust Wolfe," said the Heller. "All he wants is a lot of blood and you're going to provide it. If the bear kills you, so much the better, as far as he's concerned. There are laws against this kind of stuff, but in case you haven't noticed it, Wolfe is the law around here."

"I figured that out."

"Good for you. There's hope for you yet, Springer."

"How am I supposed to get out of this?" I asked.

"Not easy, but there's—" The Heller was cut off short by the *thunk* of a knife on the table. He started to make a move, looked up and stopped. Our two bodyguards were back. Five or six men stood behind them. None of them looked happy.

"Mr. Bolivar has taken ill," said one of them.

"Mr. Wolfe suggests that perhaps you would like to return to your room. You will need rest for tomorrow."

I didn't imagine I had any choice in the matter. They led me out to the vehicle. Pancho was stretched out on the back seat. He didn't look like he felt too good. I was more worried about him and what might be happening to the Heller and Angelo than I was about the bear or what they might do to me. The vehicle started moving.

"Ten minutes, Mr. Bok." The voice was as even as ever.

Pancho moaned and held his head. He started to say something, but couldn't get any words out, fell back against the seat.

We got to the hotel room and I propped Pancho in the shower, turned it on full cold. After a few minutes he came around.

"Don't know what happened, Carl. Don't think they hit me. As soon as I got to the street everything went blank. Someone put me out quick."

"I think we're in over our heads, Pancho," I said as he dragged himself out of the shower. "These boys play rough."

As Pancho dried himself off, I walked to the door and tried to open it. I couldn't. It was locked from the outside. Trapped.

"What are we going to do?" asked Pancho.

"Get some sleep," I said. "I've got a bear to fight tomorrow and you might have to pick up the pieces."

The bed was soft and too short for me. I slept like a rock.

§ § §

X.

A late breakfast was delivered to our room. I requested some literature on bears and read about them for awhile. The old man had been right on the nose.

Bears were dangerous.

I had no idea what a bio-engineered bear might be like, but figured I'd find out soon enough.

I worked out a little in the hotel room, did some exercises. My foot felt pretty good, seemed to have healed nicely. Those Earthie doctors sure knew their stuff.

Pancho and I were taken to the stadium. It was a long ride, almost to the edge of town. I kept wondering about the Heller and what he had said. I hoped he was all right.

The stadium was open at the top, with heated stands. Looked like it could hold over 100,000 people and although it was early, it was already filling up. The sky was blue and clear overhead. I didn't see any bears.

We were led down a series of corridors and stairs to a dressing room deep in the stadium. Several people, gladiators by the looks of them, were milling around, playing with cards on the benches, leaning against the walls, talking. They all looked up when we came in. One particularly mean-looking man came over to us.

"You are the Springer?" He had a scar that ran from his belly to his chest. It was white and ugly.

"That's me."

He extended a hand, I shook it. For a small man, he had a powerful grip.

"They call me Taros. Out there I fight with the vibroclub. It is said that I am good, but I believe in the luck. Today, I warm up the audience for you."

"For me?"

"You fight the bear. It is you they have come to see."

The way he put it, it didn't sound very appealing, more like being the main course at dinner.

"Do they often fight bears here?" I asked.

He looked puzzled. "Oh, I see," he said. "You made with the joke." He looked at me harder, squinting his eyes. "Or maybe it is that you do not know. It is seldom they fight the bear. Few are foolish enough to try it. Most have died on the sand."

"Thanks for the cheerful information. I don't suppose you have any advice on how I should handle this bear?"

"You have your weapon?"

"They gave me a knife," I said, "but I don't want to use it. I'd rather not kill the animal, if possible."

"You are either the bravest or the craziest man I have ever met." It didn't sound like a compliment. "Maybe, maybe you could defeat the bear with the short knife. Without it, there is almost no chance. Others have tried, but none so large as you, of course."

"This particular bear is supposed to have been bio-engineered. What does that mean?"

The gladiator stepped back, shocked. "*That one!* You are crazy. There is no doubt. Four meters tall, a thousand kilos. All who have faced him have died quickly. You are a dead man."

"All?"

He nodded gravely. "None have walked away."

"Mr. Wolfe didn't mention that minor point."

"Oh. You fight for the Wolf. That explains many things."

"What is there about this Wolfe? I've never heard anyone say anything good about him."

"It is, perhaps, because there is nothing good to say. He is a bad man, a very bad man. His hands are dirty with the blood of many people. What he wants, he buys with his filthy money. What he cannot buy, he takes by force. This town, it belongs to him. He knows all that happens here. He started by taking land from poor farmers and trappers. Now it is said, and I do not doubt it, that every official for several hundred kilometers is in his pocket."

"And you?" I asked. "Does he own you?"

"I am but a gladiator, a poor one at that. I am not important enough to be noticed."

"This bear, is he kept around here?"

He nodded. "Down the hall to the left are the animal rooms. You can not miss him. He is the one with death in his eyes."

A man stuck his head into the dressing room and called out several names. Taros picked up his equipment, turned back to me.

"I wish you the luck," he said. "Although I fear it will not be enough."

I shook his hand as he left and turned to Pancho, who had been taking this all in, turning paler and paler. "Let's go see this so-called bear," I said, with more bravado than I felt.

We walked down the corridor. I could smell the animals before we saw them. Hear them, too. They made a lot of noise. A man was standing in front of the door.

"I'm Carl Bok, of Springworld," I said. "I'm to fight the bear today. Could I see him?"

He looked me up and down. "Might as well," he said. "Go on in."

Inside was a huge room, filled with caged animals of all descriptions, some I didn't recognize. They all had one thing in common,

though—they all looked dangerous. I walked around and . . . there!

The gladiator hadn't exaggerated, not one bit. Even on all fours, it was nearly twice as tall as me. Easily went over a thousand kilos. He paced restlessly from one end of his cage to the other, taking random swipes at the bars with his huge paw as he went. His fur was a dirty yellow-white and matted; he smelled like a thousand wet dogs. Foam dripped from his jaws.

He looked like a bad dream come alive. I wanted out. This was crazy.

When I turned from the bear, Pancho was talking with three men in the doorway. Several policemen stood out in the hall. Pancho didn't look happy at all. Two of the men were heavy-set, burly types, the third had "lawyer" written all over him. He was carrying a folder. Copy of my contract, no doubt. I joined them.

"Mr. Bok," said the lawyer, extending his hand, "I represent Mr. Wolfe."

I ignored the hand. "Then you can tell Mr. Wolfe he can fight this creature himself."

"You jest, of course. The contract—"

"I signed to fight a bear, not a monster."

"You signed to fight whatever we put you against. Not to do so would be a serious breach of contract. At my word, if I felt you were inclined to back out of our agreement, these policemen would take you into custody. The penalty for breach of contract is one year in prison for each P1000 forfeited. The judges around here are not known to be lenient in matters such as this."

"And I suppose all the judges are hand-picked by our friend Mr. Wolfe."

He just grinned, the bastard. "Fifteen years in prison is a very long time, Mr. Bok. Besides, your two friends from last night, the gentleman from Hell and his small partner, will be anxious to watch you on the holo. They are special guests of Mr. Wolfe, and if you should fail to appear, it is possible they could meet with an accident. That would be tragic. I suggest you ready yourself for the match. It is almost time."

The two heavies followed us back to the dressing room. I felt like busting a few heads, but it was hopeless. They really had us. Maybe I did have rocks for brains.

Pancho gave me a rubdown while we waited. He was somber and depressed, even more than I was. I tried to cheer him up.

"It could be worse," I said.

"How? Tell me, how?"

"I could have to eat the bear."

He laughed in spite of himself. We were both still giggling and fooling around when

they came to get me. We sobered up fast. I picked up the knife. It was smaller than my hand, worthless. I kept it anyway, put it in my belt. Maybe I wouldn't have to use it. Maybe I would.

"Carl?"

I turned to Pancho. He slapped me on the back, squeezed my arm. He was close to tears.

"Good luck," he said. "Come back."

"I have to come back," I said, forcing a cheerfulness I didn't feel. "My wheelchair's stuck in a restroom in Washdeece. Someone's got to pay the rental on it."

We shook hands and I went out to face the bear.

The crowd roared as I walked onto the sand. Didn't all these people have anything better to do with their time than watch me get mauled? The stadium was filled. I felt dwarfed and insignificant as I walked to the middle of the arena. I was accompanied by two remote-controlled holo cameras about a meter tall that glided along beside me on stilted platforms. A referee stood on the edge of the sand. I noticed he didn't carry a rifle. Another rule bent a little. An announcer was saying something over the loudspeakers, but I couldn't make out the words through the noise of the crowd. Then they let the bear loose and the stands went wild.

It was easy to see who they were rooting for.

At first, the bear just circled the arena, panting and sniffing at everything. He seemed to be confused about where he was. Maybe I had a chance, after all. I just kept away from him, stayed on the opposite side of the arena. This lasted about five minutes. Then he sat down and sniffed at the air, weaving his massive head back and forth. I had a wild feeling that he might fall asleep.

Then he smelled me.

He came towards me in a slow lope. I had to move away from the wall so that I wouldn't get cornered. I faked a movement to my left and he wasn't fooled a bit. He didn't seem to be mad or anything, just curious. When he hit me I got the feeling that it was a playful slap. It sent me flying about ten meters and I landed on my side with my ears ringing. Before I could get to my knees, he was on me, rolling me around like a ball. He still seemed to be playing, not hitting very hard, but a thousand-kilo playmate was something I didn't need. I rolled out of his reach and got to my feet.

The next time he came at me, I twisted around and got on his back. He didn't like that too much and tried to shake me off. I held onto his thick fur with one hand and tried to

find the pressure points on his neck with the other. It was impossible. His fur was too thick, I couldn't get enough pressure on the arteries. He kept pulling his head around, trying to bite me. His jaws made a horrible snapping sound, his teeth were huge, his breath stank. He was getting mad.

He tried rolling over and I jumped free, got out of the way, fast. He could squash me with no trouble at all. I tried running away and slipped. By the time I got to my feet he was on me, rearing back on his hind legs.

I knew exactly what that old trapper had felt like. This was the first time I'd seen the bear upright and it was frightening. *Tall!* I went weak in my knees. He grabbed me easily with one huge paw. I fought it without any effect. His claws were as long as my hand. The other arm hit me hard and before I knew what was happening, he'd drawn me up to his chest. My face was buried in his smelly fur and I struggled like a wild man. I kicked and I bit and I threw my arms and legs everywhere they would reach. Nothing worked. My ears started pounding and all I could see was red. I was blacking out. I tried to get to my knife, couldn't. I bit at his fur, huge hunks of it came off in my mouth. I spit it out, bit some more. I kicked and kicked and kicked and something must have happened because I suddenly became aware of his loud roar and I was rolling end over end across the sand. This time I drew my knife. It seemed pitifully small.

He charged and I swung. No doubt about it now—he was mad. I tried for his eyes, figuring that was my only chance. I never came close. He batted my hand away and I watched the knife fly into the stands. Gone.

Then I noticed my hand; it was slashed and bloody, the tendons were showing. I must have looked too long because out of nowhere a huge paw filled with claws caught me in the chest and sent me flying. Everything below my chin was covered with blood. I shook my head. There had to be an answer. A holo camera moved in for a good shot.

Cube squares. It came to me just like that.

There are limits as to how large any given animal can grow. There is always an inhibiting factor. I'm about as large as any human can be. If they're much larger, their skeletons can't support their weight. That's why they can't grow ants as big as houses. That bear was big. *Too big.* Something had to give.

At the next charge I hit him hard and low. He wasn't expecting anything like that and he lost his balance for a second. A second was all I needed. I threw everything I had against the

leg that was holding his weight. He went over with a loud crack. A broken bone. Maybe now I could hold my own. He roared in pain, stood on his hind legs.

Oh damn, a front leg. I had to break a *front* leg! I backpedaled as fast as I could. It wasn't near fast enough. He was coming and he was coming hard. Blood flecked at his mouth and his head swished back and forth as he roared and charged at me. I never had a chance. He caught me a good one along the side of my head. Everything went black for a split second and I tasted blood and suddenly there he was, hovering over me on his back two legs, ready for the kill. I was backed up against a wall, nowhere to go. A holo camera was silently circling around to get a good close up of the bear ripping me apart. Too close.

The bear stood to his full height and pulled back his good arm. I twisted to my right and grabbed the holo camera by its base. He swung and I swung, putting everything I had behind it. I was a little faster and mashed the side of his head with the camera. He went down in a heap, legs twitching. He was out cold.

Cold meant unconscious. I'd won. It took a few seconds for that to sink in. Then I could hear the crowd through the ringing in my ears. *I'd won!* I dropped the holo camera and it automatically righted itself. Flowers and beer bottles were being thrown through the air. I didn't care about that at all. P15,000 was waiting for me at the end of the corridor. But before I'd made it off the sand, my legs gave out from under me and I guess I kind of passed out for a while.

Because when I opened my eyes, B'ooosa was there. The dean, too. Pancho was there, everything was blurry, my eyes wouldn't focus. They were arguing with somebody. I tried to sit up, couldn't. My chest was sprayed with plastiflesh. Best I could do was to open my eyes and try to focus.

Everybody was mad; at me, at Pancho, at Mr. Wolfe, at the lawyer. Everybody seemed mad at everybody else. I felt right at home.

"About time you joined the party," said B'ooosa, noticing that my eyes were open. My eyes might have been open, but my brain wasn't working too well.

"You found me," I said.

"A giant like you leaves large footprints, everyone remembers you. It was easy to trace you here. But we couldn't find out where you were staying last night. People in this city seem remarkably close-mouthed." He glared at Mr. Wolfe, who was standing behind his lawyer and several bodyguards. "And these goons," he

indicated several policemen standing around, "detained us so that we were unable to stop that ridiculous fight."

One of the policemen stepped forward. "Goons?" he said. "I resent that. We're respectable—"

"Shut up!" said B'ooosa with considerable irritation in his voice. No one challenged him. They'd have been fools to try.

I tried to sit up, managed it this time. "All this doesn't matter," I said. "It's over and done. Let me get my money and leave."

"There are complications, Carl," said B'ooosa. "There evidently will be no money."

"No money?"

"There is a clause in your contract," said the lawyer, "that holds you responsible for any damage you might cause during the match. It is a normal precaution we take. You signed the contract; it's valid and will hold up in any court. You're liable for damages."

"What damages?" The only damage I could see was done to me.

"The holo camera you mistreated suffered considerable stress."

"They're practically indestructible," I shouted. That's why I'd picked it up.

"Nevertheless, we have determined that it incurred damages to the sum of, shall we say, P15,000."

"That's ridiculous!" Plasti-flesh or not, I was going to tear him apart.

Pancho and B'ooosa held me back. Even as mad as I was, it didn't take very much effort on their part. I'd had it. In more ways than one.

Dr. M'bisa, the dean, came over to me. He was really upset. "Forget it, Carl," he said. It was the last decent thing he said to me for two days.

XI.

I really caught it. I suppose I'd brought it on myself, but it seemed like everyone was over-reacting. I had several long talks with the dean. At one point he handed me a petition from the students saying that they didn't hold me responsible for the tax. I noticed Pancho hadn't signed it. At least he was on my side. Seemed like he was the only one, though, and he caught a lot of trouble for going along with me.

There wasn't anything official they could do to us, though. I caught some extra schoolwork and stuff like that, but I hadn't really broken any rules, just stretched them a lot. Bad judge-

ment was the term the dean used, along with childish pride and stubbornness. He used these terms a lot in our little discussions. I didn't mind the schoolwork, I was mending in bed, anyway. The rest of the group was in and out: the official part of the tour on Earth was finished and there were ten days of free time before we left.

That gave me ten days and I was still P14,662.50 behind.

B'ooosa chided me a lot in that detached way he has. I think he was amused at the lengths I had gone to try and pay back the money. He also told me the dean was probably worried about the bad publicity and loss of potential students if one of us happened to get himself killed on an unsupervised adventure.

I was lying in the hotel bed, surrounded by books, when B'ooosa walked in with Pancho. The books were for effect; actually I was digging through my mail. There was a lot of it.

"Back from the great cultural centers of the universe?" I asked.

"You really ought to try it sometime, Carl," said B'ooosa. "It's possible some knowledge might work its way through that thick skull of yours."

"Love to," I said. "But as you can easily see, I'm a poor invalid, confined to bed. I may never heal."

Pancho tossed a book at me. I caught it easily. With my "bad" hand.

"You don't fool me," he said. "I saw you doing deep knee bends last night after you thought we were asleep. You're just lucky the dean hasn't sent down word to keep you tied up for the next week or so." He flopped in a chair and B'ooosa walked to the bed, picked up one of the letters.

"More bears?" he asked.

"No," I shuddered. "But just about everything else. What's a lion?"

B'ooosa set the letter he was holding back down on the bed. "Are you sure that you don't have any Nurhodesian blood in you?" he asked.

"No, I..." Then I realized he was joking. "Why?"

"You remind me a little of my brother. Of course he was not quite so tall as you. Nor as white, for that matter. But you and he have many points in common."

"Like what?"

"Like stubbornness and a childish tendency towards illogical activities."

"Let me guess," I said. "He's also reckless and won't listen to anything anyone tells him."

"It sounds like you've met him," he said, smiling.

"It sounds like you don't like him," I said.

"On the contrary. I'm quite fond of him. It is only that the young on Nurhodesia are encouraged to be headstrong. It is a phase they all go through. Even I did, if you can believe that, though it seems like a long time ago."

That I had a hard time swallowing. "I don't understand."

"It serves a worthwhile purpose. Our planet was once like yours, Carl. It was harsh and not without its share of danger. Taming the planet did not come easy, it took many generations and much loss of life. But now it is done, finished. We live in what would seem to you to be a garden, a paradise. Yet we know our history and will not allow ourselves to grow complacent, soft. Therefore our young are encouraged to be reckless; to test out the boundaries of their abilities. In this way they learn much about life, about themselves. They learn what they can do and what they cannot. They learn humility, restraint, a sense of purpose overlaid by a knowledge of their position in the scheme of things. I did not learn the use of the quarterstaff in some social club, I learned it in the streets, in the jungles. It is part of my life, my heritage. When I dress in my loincloth and beads, it may seem ludicrous to you—a lawyer playing aborigine—but it is deadly serious to me. It is a part of my soul, my spirit; it connects me with my father and his father back through the ages."

I still had a hard time picturing B'ooosa as being even the slightest bit reckless.

"Of course," he said, "few of them carry it to the extremes that you have."

"I'm still almost P15,000 short and there's not much time left."

"They also learn a few things about pride," he said with a wry smile. "And the point at which things are better left undone."

"This is one thing that's not going to be left undone," I said. "I've started it and I'm going to finish it."

"If you keep trying to fight monsters like that bear and deal with people like that Wolfe fellow, all you'll get is dead. I would miss having you around to entertain me."

"How can I tell the good offers from the bad? I get so many. Look." I held up a handful of envelopes.

"Most of these have clauses you wouldn't like. They are all trying to take advantage of your temporary novelty value. And your lack of legal training, I might add. If I had seen your contract with Mr. Wolfe before you had signed it, you would never have gotten into that mess."

"Does that mean you'll help me?"

"You are like my brother. He took advantage of me too, when I would let him. I'd hate to see you die and not get paid for it. I'll look over the contracts for you, that much I'll do. Just don't tell the dean I had anything to do with this. I'm supposed to be a steadying influence on you two rascals."

That got me out of bed. I spread the offers out on the table and the three of us started looking them over.

"No lions or tigers," said B'ooosa.

"Or bears," said Pancho.

"Sharks and bulls are out, too," I added. "After all, it's my body."

"Here's one," said Pancho. "Wrestling alligators in a place called The Glades. Alligators are just big lizards with lots of teeth."

"Let me look at that," said B'ooosa. He studied it for a minute. "No good," he said. "The money looks fine on the surface, but it's all tied up with how much holo time they can sell. If they don't sell much time, you don't get much money. Better you should look for one big show than to try to pick up a lot of little ones."

We eliminated most of the offers.

"This one looks interesting," B'ooosa said. "No animals. It's a formal challenge from a gladiatorial team in Lusaka. If you come up with a team with a total weight of 400 kilograms, they'll take you on with a team of equal weight for a prize of P60,000. The prize is bonded, and independent of the sponsoring corporation's profit or loss. Sounds fair, but you'd need a team."

I looked at Pancho. "You interested?"

"Not me, man. 400 kilograms of Earthies is a real mob. They'd crawl all over us, likely to bite us to death."

"Nonsense," said B'ooosa. "Two good men back-to-back with quarterstaves can hold off any mob indefinitely, as long as their opponents don't use long-range weapons. Gladiators are only allowed to use clubs, vibroclubs, quarterstaves, and bolos. Only the bolo can be thrown effectively, and it's easy to counter with a quarterstaff. Just get them to set a time limit and you shouldn't have any trouble. It's certainly easier than sharks or bears. More dignified, too, I might add."

I had my doubts, remembering the time B'ooosa flattened me with the quarterstaff. "It wouldn't work."

"Why not?"

"I'm not nearly good enough with the quarterstaff."

"You're not *that* bad, Carl. All you need is practice and some instruction. From what I've

seen of the Earthies, they're not too good with the quarterstaff, even the best of them."

"But I only have a few days and . . . hey! Would you teach me?"

"Me? Why should I have anything to do with this? I don't usually spend my time teaching hard-headed kids how to go out and get themselves hurt. Besides, there are some museums I haven't seen yet."

"But you're good," I said. "The best in the University. Better than anyone on this planet, I bet. You could teach me a lot."

"Well," he said. "I suppose even someone like you could learn the rudiments if he tried hard enough. It would be a challenge of sorts. If I could teach you, I could teach anybody. Of course it would take years before you could become even halfway decent by Nurhodesian standards, but it shouldn't take that much for you to hold your own against the Earthies."

"It might work," said Pancho. "I could handle the bolo."

"You?" I asked.

"Sure. On Selva we are practically born with bolos in our mouths. I'm good with one. Before I joined *Starschool* I was village champion."

Champion? It began to look almost possible. Only . . . "We'd need to find another quarterstaffer." I looked at Pancho and grinned. He caught it right away.

"He'd have to be good," said Pancho. We both looked at B'ooosa.

"Forget it," he said. "I'm not interested. I'm too old and too smart for that foolishness."

"Wouldn't work, anyway," said Pancho. "Mr. B'ooosa isn't tall enough. It would take a lot of man to protect you. We'd better find someone larger."

"Nonsense," said B'ooosa. "Size means nothing with the quarterstaff. I've already shown you that."

"Besides," said Pancho, grinning. "He would have to be someone strong and fast. Someone with courage."

"Are you saying that I—"

"That's right," I interrupted, looking at Pancho and ignoring B'ooosa. "He should have brains as well. Someone you could trust in a fight."

"Look—"

"Someone who could fight as well as other people talk," said Pancho. "Where could we find someone like that?"

"I could place a wannad," I said. "Wanted: One strong courageous gladiator to help a couple of foolish schoolboys pay off a debt. Experience with quarterstaff a necessity. Nur-

hodesians need not apply.' Someone would answer it. A bum, probably, a derelict who didn't know one end of a vibroclub from the other. We'd most likely both get killed trying to protect him."

"Enough," said B'ooosa. "Enough."

"You'll do it?" I asked him.

"It seems I have no choice," he said good-naturedly. "If I don't, you boys are bound to get into trouble. Besides, winning this one should put an end, once and for all, to all this undignified sporting with animals."

Together, the three of us weighed in at 320 kilograms, B'ooosa also being a giant by Earth standards, even though he weighed a paltry 95 kilos. That left us 80 kilos to round off the team. I had an idea where I could find 80 kilos of mean gladiator.

I found him in the Plaza de Gladiatores, but he looked like he'd been the one who fought the bear, not me.

"Shize, Springer," said the Heller. "I didn't think I'd be seeing you again."

"It wasn't your fault, Markos," I said. "And thanks for the warning about the bear."

He rubbed the side of his face. It was swollen and patched roughly with plasti-flesh. "There were other people who didn't care for that little conversation we had."

"They almost killed him," said Angelo, who didn't look too good himself. "It was very close."

"They ain't gonna kill me till they can't get one more dightin' pesa out of me. Gonna dightin' bleed me dry if they can," said the Heller. "But they're gonna have one hell'va fight on their hands. Old Markos don't give up easy." He took a long pull on the beer I'd bought him.

"I'm sorry I brought you trouble," I said.

"Shize, man," said Markos. "I bring my own trouble. Bad news is my middle name. But they had no call messin' up on my little friend here. It was none of his affair. How's he gonna find one of them *señoritas* if he keeps gettin' bashed up like that? He'll end up as ugly as me. Broke as me, too."

"I made it my business, amigo," said Angelo. "Your trouble is mine."

Markos shook his head, looked up at me. "But what brings you here? Can't be you're looking for another bear."

"No. I'm looking for a gladiator."

"This is the right place. Whole dightin' town's full of 'em. What you got in mind?"

"I need a fourth for a team we're fielding against a bunch of Earthies from Lusaka. Has to be good with a vibroclub and weigh 80 kilos

or less. Purse is P60,000. It's bonded. If we win, it's P15,000 all the way around."

"I'm 78 kilos and can do things with a vibe' that you ain't thought of. That kinda money I could get off planet and away from Wolfe. Start over. I'm your man."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

XII.

By the time Markos and I got back, B'oosa had all the details ironed out. We were going to be facing a team of nine Earthies: four with quarterstuffs, two each with clubs and bolos, and one vibroclub. Each team was allowed only one vibroclub; it was sort of a rule.

We would win if we had at least one man left after ten minutes. The referees would send a team member off the field if they judged him severely enough disabled. This meant unconscious, or worse. The match was to be held in one week.

It was a long week. We worked out constantly. Somehow we had to integrate the fighting styles from four completely different planets. Somehow it seemed to work.

What we ended up with was mostly a defensive strategy. Since they had so many more people, it was obvious that if we got down to one, the fight would end in seconds. So we worked out a conservative strategy, a waiting game. B'oosa and I would stay back-to-back while Pancho and the Heller worked from our sides. We figured we could hold off almost anything that way. It took a lot to convince the Heller of that. He was more inclined towards the "let's wade in and bash heads" school of thought. He also felt the quarterstaff was effete, a weapon for sissies. B'oosa took him down a notch or two the same way he'd handled me. There wasn't any problem after that.

Lusaka was hot and dusty. Tens of thousands of spectators surrounded the small, hard-baked clay ring. It was obvious who they were rooting for. The match had been billed as "The Earth Against the Offworld Monsters" or something like that. Anyway, we were the bad guys. I was tired of being the bad guy.

We were introduced in the center of the ring to a rousing chorus of boos and jeers. The Earthies got all the applause. They were small, but there were nine of them. Nine had never seemed like such a large number before. We shook hands, took our opening stances. Ten minutes, that's all. Ten minutes.

It started.



We moved cautiously to the center of the ring, B'oosa and I back-to-back, Pancho and Markos at our sides.

"Here," said B'oosa and we froze. The Earthies circled us warily, with a dart here or there, a small feint. Nothing serious.

Pancho started his move. The bolo is a heavy leather-covered ball on the end of an elastic tether, tied around the wrist. Properly thrown, it will wrap itself around a person's ankle and bring him down. Then the idea was for Pancho to drag him close enough for Markos to reach him with the vibroclub, without leaving the protection of the quarterstuffs. One touch with a vibroclub is enough to produce a temporarily disabling paralysis. A blow to the head with one is always serious, sometimes permanently disabling, sometimes fatal.

The Earthies seemed bewildered and confused. Usually matches like this are a free-for-all, with individual battles taking place right from the start. I don't think they knew what to do with us.

Pancho scored first. He caught a staffer by the leg with his bolo and started pulling him in. We covered for him, inching sideways towards the fallen man.

Markos hit him and he went out. The referee called time out and they removed the Earthie. Eight to four, now. Time started up again.

Same strategy. This time Pancho hooked a guy with a club. One of the staffers tried to cover for him, but B'oosa and I easily held him off. The man with the club stiffened as Markos hit him.

"Like fish in a barrel," said the Heller. I wondered about that. The only fish I knew on Earth were sharks.

Time started again. They had regrouped, copied our defense: two staffers covering a bolo and the vibroclub. But that left three men to rotate and they pressed us from the left as the rest of the crew came in a block from the right. Things got pretty busy. I caught a guy with a club in the stomach. He went down, but not out. Deflected a bolo, parried with a staff. I could feel B'oosa moving rapidly behind my back. Something from out of nowhere hit my left shin hard. I went off balance, staggered. A staff swung down at me and I barely knocked it aside in time.

"Take that, you dighitin' dighter," said Marcos, and another of their staffers fell. The Heller was grinning, though the side of his head was all bloody and it looked like he'd lost a couple of teeth. He was easily the most blood-thirsty of us all.

It was six of them to the four of us, and it looked like we had the edge.

This time they charged the Heller. At least it looked that way at first. Didn't notice the bolo man until he had worked his way around to the other side and caught Pancho by the leg.

"Carl," he shouted. He was being dragged out of the formation.

We shifted to try to give him some protection, but the others were all over us. B'oosa sent their other bolo player to his knees with a quick jab to the chin. A gentle tap to the side of his head dropped him to the clay. The referee should have called time then. He didn't.

Their club man had gotten to Pancho, was really working him over. Where was that referee? All Pancho could do was protect his face. The club man could see that we wouldn't be able to get over to him and he was taking his time, obviously enjoying himself. I heard something crack—ribs, maybe, or a wrist. Pancho was in real pain and would have fallen if the Earthie had let go of him. As it was, the club man held him up, beating him, until a staffer worked his way over. The staffer caught Pancho in the belly and lifted him off his feet.

On the return swing, he caught him across the back of the neck. Pancho went down hard and didn't move.

Then the referee called time.

I was really mad. Pancho had obviously been disabled before the staffer got there. I started to protest, but B'oosa and the Heller stopped me.

"Remember the arm wrestlin'?" asked Markos.

I nodded.

"Like that. There ain't no rules. Just got to do it."

Five more minutes. They had us, five to three. This time they threw everything at me. Guess they figured I was the weakest link. I parried the bolo twice, their staffers kept me pretty busy. B'oosa had trained me well, though. I was holding my own. But I never saw the Earthie with the vibroclub.

"Springer! Watch that dighter!" Suddenly I felt an elbow push me aside. It was the Heller, throwing himself between me and the Earthie. Then I got the bolo all tangled around my staff and the other staffer came in quick and in the confusion, somehow we got separated. B'oosa and I were still back-to-back, but the Heller was all out by himself, hunched over, facing the Earthie, vibroclub against vibroclub.

In a one-on-one vibroclub fight between two good opponents there doesn't seem to be much action, but there is. Everything is position. They circle each other, make small darting movements to try to draw the other off balance, to make him commit to a losing course of action. It's usually a lot of this and then a quick slice through the opponent's defenses. The Earthie was good, but Markos was better. He made a complicated movement and tapped the Earthie in passing, dropping him. The referee should have called time then, but didn't.

One of their staffers and a club man had Markos surrounded. The staffer flipped the vibroclub from his hand. We tried to move over to help him, but the bolo had me by the leg. I was trying to get untangled and their other staffer was beating me on the shoulders.

Without a weapon, the Heller didn't have a chance. They could have finished it quickly and easily, but they didn't. The clubber waded in and beat the Heller unconscious. Held him up for the staffer who caught him hard on the neck, twice, three times, four. The crowd loved it.

"He's out," I yelled. "He's out."

Something cracked in the Heller's neck and his head spun around in a crazy direction. They let loose of him and he fell to the

ground. They kept beating him.

We worked our way over to him. This was ridiculous. I got in a lucky shot and dropped the bolo man when he came too close to me. Then B'ooosa stepped on the discarded vibroclub. I could feel the jolt through his back.

Then the referee called time.

Things were pretty hectic. They took Markos off the field, along with the two Earthies. I started to argue with the referees, but I didn't get anywhere. I was mad. They ruled that B'ooosa should stay in, since a Nurhodesian on his knees was almost as tall as an Earthie.

"Carl," said B'ooosa, in considerable pain, but not allowing himself to show it. "*That's* the only referee we can count on." He pointed to the large clock at the end of the field. Two minutes ten seconds to go. It started moving again.

They came at us, two staffers and a club. On his knees, B'ooosa couldn't handle his staff. I sort of hovered over him, protecting him the best I could. Maybe the sting of the vibroclub would wear off and he could get back into action again.

I tried to use my body as a shield, holding them off as well as I could with the staff. There were just too many of them. One of the staffers came in hard and caught me across the ribs. Something cracked and it wasn't his staff. I could barely feel the pain, but I knew something was broken. The staffer, though, was in trouble; he'd come in too close when he hit me. B'ooosa may not have been able to use his staff, but he wasn't helpless. He grabbed the staffer's leg, pulled him off balance. I gave him a nice tap on the side of the head and he went down. All of a sudden my side really started to hurt. Wish I'd hit him harder.

A quick time out while they hauled the Earthie off. My side was on fire, a couple of ribs busted, at least. B'ooosa tried to stand, couldn't. They wouldn't let him use a discarded club or bolo. He could only use the staff or his hands. They seemed pretty quick to enforce the rules that were against us. There was a little over a minute left. I was dead tired, my body was covered with welts.

They came in for the kill. The staffer kept me busy from the front while the guy with the club attacked me from the back. It was all I could do to keep the staffer away and the fellow with the club was tearing into me. He got a good shot at the back of my leg and my muscle went all into knots. I had to lean on B'ooosa to stay upright.

That was when I had the staff knocked out of my hands. Then the guy with the club jumped on my back and started beating my shoulders and head. The staffer came in to finish me off.

But I wasn't ready to be finished off yet. I reached over my shoulder and grabbed the Earthie's arm, flipped him over my head at the onrushing staffer. They got all tangled up, went down in a heap. B'ooosa handed me his staff and I started towards them to break some heads.

Then the gun sounded.

I hurt so bad, I thought I'd been shot. It took a second for me to realize what that meant. The match was over. I was still on my feet. We'd won.

I had to help B'ooosa off the field. It was almost as dangerous as the fight. There were a lot of unhappy people in the stands and they seemed to be throwing everything that wasn't nailed down in our direction. Some of them were trying to get on the field and the local



police didn't seem too concerned about keeping them back.

In the office, however, everyone was all smiles. The match had been a huge success, with holo coverage live on Earth and syndicated to three other planets. I tried to find Pancho and the Heller, but they had been taken to a local hospital and immediately lifted to a regional intensive care center. It was that serious.

Neither one of them was expected to live.

It was a shock, stunned me. Up to now it had all been some sort of a game. People got hurt, but nobody died. And all for what? For me and my foolish pride. All for nothing.

I didn't even notice when they gave us the money. The check just sort of appeared in my hand. I looked at it. Numbers printed on a piece of paper don't equate with a friend's life. Everything went sour in my mouth and my stomach churned. I didn't want to have anything to do with the money, handed it to B'ooosa.

"I've got to find them," I said.

B'ooosa nodded. "Soon enough," he said. "There's nothing we can do now. First we have to fix you up."

I looked down at my body. It seemed to belong to someone else. I was covered with blood and bruises. I looked like a wild man.

I felt like a fool.

XIII.

It was our last night on Earth. B'ooosa and I sat in a booth at the Plaza de Gladiatores. Pancho was already aboard the *Starschool*. In the infirmary. In a body cast from chin to toe. At least he was alive. The Heller hadn't been so lucky.

"Not a bad place for local color," said B'ooosa, sipping on a beer. "I can understand why you preferred this to the museums."

I just nodded, my beer untouched in front of me. I didn't feel much like talking. There was something I had to do before we left, someone I had to find. This was the logical place.

B'ooosa was trying to cheer me up. Sure, it hadn't been a fair fight; but it hadn't been the worst he'd seen, not by a long shot. We had each entered into it of our own free will, the Heller included. We'd known the risk. All in all, he thought it had been an educational experience.

"Educational?" I asked. One friend dead, another seriously injured. "What's the going price on education these days?"

"Whatever one is willing to pay," he said, staring off into the darkness of the cantina. "Some risk more than others. Life is never easy. On Nurhodesia that knowledge comes early. My brother was younger than you when he died."

"Died? I didn't..."

"It was a matter of some importance to him. I felt it was trivial, actually. But to the young, everything is important. It's possible I could have stopped it; he respected me. But I learned long ago that you can fight no one's battles but your own. If it hadn't been that, it would have been something else. He was headstrong and foolish. Yet he had the right to live his own life. And die it, too."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't be. Death is part of life, also."

"Carl!" A voice came from the doorway of the cantina. It was Angelo. Little Angelo.

"Sit down," I said, pushing back a chair for him. I started to introduce B'ooosa.

"I have seen this man," said Angelo, shaking B'ooosa's hand. "He was with the quarterstaff at the fight. A brave man." He paused for a second. "I watched it on the holo."

"Your friend, Markos..." I started.

"He was a good man. An honest man, in a hard sort of way. He had many troubles, but he handled them to the best that he could."

"I want you to have this," I said, passing over a packet.

"What is this?" he asked.

"It's your friend's share of the purse. Markos earned it. I want you to have it."

He looked at the package carefully. "There is much that I could do with this money."

"Can I offer you some advice?" I asked.

"Si, amigo. To you I will always be glad to listen."

"Forget about being a gladiator. There is no glory there, only deception. This planet is full of men like Mr. Wolfe, ready to take advantage of you. The fights are vicious and wasteful, a circus that only exists to feed the violent impulses of an overcrowded planet. Once it may have been noble, but now it is anything but that. There is no heroism here, only desperation. It's not like this everywhere. Look around. Find something different."

"I think you speak the truth. As many fights as Markos had, he was always talking of going to Perrin to start over. Things were better there, he said. He was one who should know. I thank you. And in the name of my friend, I twice thank you."

"I only wish it could be more," I said. "Enough to buy you passage to Perrin."

"I think this should cover it," said B'oosa, dropping another packet on the table.

"What?" I said.

"This is my share and Pancho's share. He spoke to me of your little friend here. We felt it was the proper thing to do, under the circumstances."

"My friends from the stars," said Angelo. "You are truly rare men. I cannot thank you enough."

"It's only money," said B'oosa. "And money should serve some useful purpose. I'm glad it found one." He looked at his digital. "Carl, we had better be going to the spaceport. I'd hate to get stuck on this planet."

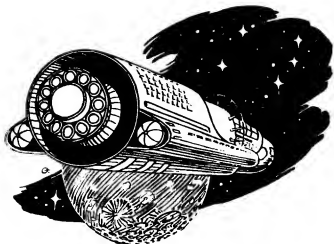
"May luck follow you always," said Angelo, embracing us as we rose to leave.

I didn't know what to say so I just hugged him, thought of Markos the Heller and wanted to get off this planet as soon as possible.

As we walked outside into the night air, I turned to B'oosa. "One thing bothers me," I said.

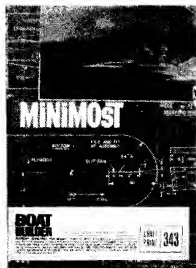
"Only one? What is it?"

"If you believe that a person can't fight anyone's battles but their own, why are you helping Angelo? Why did you help me?"



"I may be logical," said B'oosa, smiling. "But I don't have to be consistent."

I laughed and we headed down the street. Next stop on the tour would be the planet Hell, but after Earth it would look like Heaven to me.

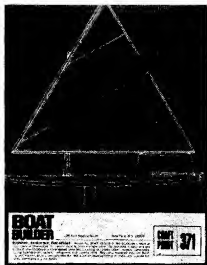


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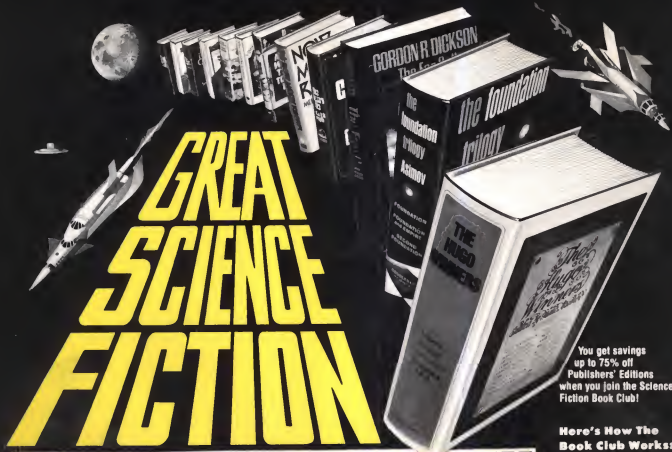
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